ソードアート・オンライン4

フェアリィ・ダンス

ＳＡＯから未だ帰還しないアスナを救うため、疑惑のＶＲＭＭＯ≪アルヴヘイム・オンライン≫にログインしたキリト。

その次世代飛行系ゲーム≪ＡＬＯ≫は、≪魔法≫という概念、プレイヤーの反応力と判断力が勝敗を決めるアクション要素、そして≪妖精≫となって空を駆け巡る≪飛翔システム≫と、≪ＳＡＯ≫に勝るとも劣らない高スペックで数多のプレイヤーを魅了していた。≪妖精≫スプリガンとなったキリトは、アスナの幽閉先――全プレイヤーの最終目標≪世界樹≫目指し突き進む……！

道中、妖精種族≪サラマンダー≫のプレイヤーたちの策略により、絶体絶命の危機に陥るキリトだったが、≪シルフ≫の少女・リーファの助力、ナビゲートピクシー・ユイのバックアップを受け、どうにか九死に一生を得る。

そしてついにキリトは≪世界樹≫の根元までたどり着く。しかしそのとき、リーファとキリトは互いの≪秘密≫を知ってしまい……。

か-16-8

ソードアート・オンライン4
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川原礫

電撃文庫
¥570

9784048684521

ISBN978-4-04-868452-1
C0193 ¥570E

1920193005707

ASCII MEDIA WORKS
発行● アスキー・メディアワークス
定価: 本体 570 円
※消費税が別に加算されます

川原 礫（かわはら れき）

人生のソロレベル上げに邁進していた私ですが某剣豪マンガを読んで気付きました。こんな私でも一人で生きているのではないということに！　そうこれを読んでくれているあなたと……そして妄想ネコミミメイドの（以下検閲）

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あべしっ！

カバー／暁印刷

004
REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE
SWORD ART ONLINE
fairy dance

「G'MORNING SUGU.
YOU SEEM AWFULLY SLEEPY.
WHAT IN THE WORLD WERE YOU DOING LAST NIGHT?」
KIRIGAYA KAZUTO § THE BLACK SWORDSMAN THAT LED THE WAY TO THE GAME CLEAR OF THE NIGHTMARE GAME <<SAO>>. AKA "KIRITO".
「MORNING, BROTHER.
U--MM..... ON THE INTERNET.....」
KIRIGAYA SUGUHA § KAZUTO = KIRITO'S SISTER, IN HER THIRD YEAR OF JUNIOR HIGH, AS WELL AS A MEMBER OF THE KENDO CLUB.

「THAT MIGHT BE TRUE.....
BUT, I, HAVE TO GET THERE.....!!」
KIRITO § THE STRONGEST <<SOLO PLAYER>> IN <<SAO>>. BECOMES A SPRIGGAN SWORDSMAN IN <<ALO>>.
「KI-KIRITO-KUN!!
WA-WAIT.....ALONE, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!」
LYFA § THE YOUNG GIRL KIRITO MET IN <<ALO>>. THE RACE OF HER FAIRY AVATAR IS A <<SYLPH>>.

「I'M HERE...!
YUI-CHAN, KIRITO-KUN!」
ASUNA § A CAPTIVE GIRL IN A HIGH SPECIFICATION VRMMO, ALFHEIM ONLINE.
「--BUT KIRIGAYA-KUN, NO, PERHAPS IT IS BETTER TO CALL YOU KIRITO-KUN. TO THINK THAT YOU WOULD COME ALL THE WAY HERE. I CANNOT DECIDE WHETHER YOU ARE BRAVE OR STUPID.」
OBERON, THE FAIRY KING § SUGOU NOBUYUKI IN THE REAL WORLD. PLOTTING ON USING THE TRUST GAINED FROM ASUNA (AKA YUUKI ASUNA)'S FATHER IN ORDER TO FORCE A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE AGAINST HER WILL.

「……YOU'RE……ONII-CHAN……?
「EH……? ----SUGU……SUGUHA……?」

† Alfheim

The continent which bears the significance «Land of the Fairies», and the stage for the next-generation MMO «ALfheim Online». Alfheim is divided into nine large regions, a capital town for each of the fairy tribes is in each region, and each region having its own special appearances.

In the nine tribes classes, wind-class Sylphs excel in flight velocity and hearing ability, fire-class Salamanders excel in weapons handling and offensive attacks, water-class Undines excel in recovery magic and underwater activities, earth-class Gnomes excel in defensive power and mining, cat-class Cait Siths excel in taming and agility/intelligence, shadow-class Spriggans excel in treasure hunting and illusions, musical-class Pucas excel in musical instruments and singing, blacksmith-class Leprechauns excel in weapons manufacturing and craftsmanship, and dark-class Imps excel in night flight and night vision.

In the middle of Alfheim the «World Tree», the final objective for all players, towers over; in its roots lie the world's largest city «Central Capital Alne».
The fairy tribe who had gained an audience with «Fairy King Oberon», living in the legendary city said to exist on top of the «World Tree», are able to be reborn into the high-order fairies «Alf».
When reincarnated into the true fairy «Alf», the flight time limit is lifted and perpetual flight is possible, and along with it becoming the rulers of the infinite skies.

マップイラスト／出光秀匡

Prologue

Looking up, there were many lights shining beyond the dim sky.

Those were not stars. They were countless icicles that hung from the vast ceiling and emitted a faint phosphorescence contained inside them. In other words, this was the bottom of a cave, and its size was the problem.

The distance to the faraway towering cliffs was, in real world distance, probably 30 kilometers. The lowest height till the ceiling was 500 meters. A countless number of carved cliffs and ravines, frozen-white lakes and snowy mountains, and fortress and castle-like structures could be seen at its bottom.

With that, the scale of the cave was unbelievable. This underground space, no, it should be called the «Underworld».

Actually, it was just that. This was another field that filled the undergrounds of the fairy world, ALfheim, a dark world of ice and snow, ruled by dreadful evil-god-class monsters. Its name is—

«Jötunheimr».

Chapter 5

"Achoo!"

Lyfa, a swordswoman of the Sylph race, quickly covered her mouth with both hands after letting out an explosive, unladylike sneeze.

She stared out toward the entrance of the shrine, afraid that the evil-god had heard her and would poke its huge face in.

Fortunately, the only thing that floated in was the falling snow. As the snow neared the fire burning on the floor of the shrine, it turned into a puff of steam and disappeared.

Lyfa crouched down by the back wall while scratching the thick fur collar of her mantle.

"Haa..."

Sighing, Lyfa began to warm herself at the nearby fire. She felt more comfortable and soon found herself nodding off to sleep.

The small stone shrine they were in was about four meters in length, width and height. The walls and ceiling were decorated with reliefs of eerie monsters that seemed to move in the firelight; it wasn't the most comfortable interior. As her gaze turned to the side, Lyfa caught sight of her companion reclining against the wall, beginning to doze off, his peaceful —or foolish— face nodding up and down like a ship bobbing in the harbor.

"Hey, wake –"

While whispering, Lyfa pulled his sharply pointed ear. The only reply was a mumble that sounded like "munyamunya". On his lap was another companion, a pixie, sleeping soundly while curled in a ball.

"Hey, if you fall asleep, you'll log out!"

She pulled his ear again. Doing this made his head end up on her thighs, his head rolling around as if looking for a comfortable position.

Lyfa's body stiffened in mortification, her hands clenching futilely as she wondered what method to attempt next to wake him.

It isn't surprising that he is falling asleep though, she realized as she looked to the lower-right of her field of vision. After all, it is past 2:00 AM in the real world. Normally, Lyfa would already have logged out and been soundly asleep in her bed.

That's right, Jötunheimr and ALfheim were worlds that were products of a gaming company. Somewhere in the real world in Japan's metropolitan city of Tokyo was a server machine and this place is a virtual world inside it. Lyfa and her companion existed here as people using the FullDive interface machine called «AmuSphere».

It was actually quite easy to leave the virtual world. One simply had to extend the index and middle fingers of his or her left hand, wave them in order to open the game menu, and press the «Log Out» button. Alternatively, you could simply lie down and fall asleep; the AmuSphere would sense the user's lowered brainwave activity and automatically disconnect. Come the next morning, users would wake comfortably in their own beds.

However, there was a specific reason that Lyfa and her companion could not sleep here.

Finally deciding on an impish course of action, Lyfa made a fist with her left hand and sharply rapped it on her partner's spiky, black-haired head.

Whoosh! Along with a burst of a refreshing sound, the yellow light which characterized a homing bullet attack activated. Lyfa's companion made a strange, startled sound and bolted upright. Immediately taking his pained head in both of his hands, he looked around and saw the smiling Lyfa.

"Good morning, Kirito-kun."

"...Oh, good morning."

Her companion was a Spriggan swordsman. He had slightly dark skin, black hair, and if not for the depressed expression, could be mistaken for the hero in a shounen manga[1].

"...I, I fell asleep?"

"And you even got a free lap pillow; you should be grateful you got off with only one small punch."

"...Then I was impolite, as an apology, you can use my lap as a pillow if you would like, Lyfa..."

"There is no need!"

Lyfa turned away quickly, casting a sidelong glance at Kirito.

"Don't say stupid things— Did you dream of any nice escape ideas?"

"Speaking of dreams, I was just about to eat this delicious looking pudding with a huge helping of ice cream."

Thinking herself a fool for asking, Lyfa's shoulders slumped and she turned back toward the entrance of the shrine. Snow danced on the wind blowing through the darkness, but nothing else moved.

There it was— the reason they couldn't log out. Kirito, Lyfa, and Yui, sleeping on Kirito's lap, were trapped in Jötunheimr, unable to escape to the surface.

Of course, if all they wanted to do was leave the game, it was easily possible. However, this shrine was neither a safe zone nor an inn. Thus, if they were to go back to reality now, their virtual bodies here would be left essentially soulless for a period of time. Virtual bodies left unattended had the tendency to attract monsters, and their helpless bodies would be reduced to nothing, causing their «Death», in no time. They would then be returned to «Sylvain». If that happened then what would be the meaning of traveling all the way here from Sylphid territory?

The purpose of this journey that Lyfa and Kirito have undertaken is to reach the central city of ALfheim: «Aarun».

They had left Sylvain earlier today— yesterday evening to be exact. After passing over a vast forest area and then through a series of mine tunnels, they were ambushed by a group of Salamanders. After repelling the attack, they had met with the Sylph Lord Sakuya, were thanked, and then left, events finally calming down some time around 1:00 AM.

At that point in time, Lyfa and Kirito had already been in FullDive for eight continuous hours, minus the time needed to take bathroom breaks. With Aarun nowhere in sight and truthfully a long way off, they decided to stop at the first village they came across and log off. Just at that moment, the pair saw a village in the middle of the forest and, cheering at their good fortune, landed in it.

At that time, even if it would have been troublesome, they should have checked the map if only to confirm the name of the village and the presence of an inn. Who would have thought...

"...Who would have thought, that village was a mimic monster..."

Kirito, who seemed to be remembering the same thing, sighed. Lyfa also sighed and nodded.

"That's true... Whoever said no monsters appear on the Aarun Plateau?"

"I believe that was you."

"I don't recall saying anything like that."

With this effortless banter, they sighed again in unison.

Upon landing in the mysterious village, they hadn't see any villagers —NPCs— while looking around. Still thinking that there should at least be an innkeeper, they went to enter the largest building in the village when...

All three buildings in the village collapsed. What used to be the inn immediately revealed a fleshy lump. However, they had no time to be surprised at that as the ground beneath their feet split open to reveal a gaping hole made of the same fleshy substance. It was a gigantic earthworm type monster that waited underground with its folds projected above ground to lure in prey.

Kirito, with Yui in his pocket, and Lyfa were pulled into the earthworm's mouth by a strong suction. While sliding down the worm's throat, Lyfa was convinced that death by being dissolved in an earthworm's digestive juices was probably the worst way of dying she had experienced in a year of playing ALO.

Their luck seemed to be good however, as the earthworm didn't appear to have a stomach. Their tour of its digestive tract lasted for a good three minutes before they were unceremoniously ejected from the other end of the earthworm, the mucus coating Lyfa's body giving her goosebumps and a sense of revulsion. As she tried to slow her fall using her wings, she began to panic.

She couldn't fly. No matter how much strength she put into her shoulder blades, she couldn't beat her wings. Straight down into the darkness she fell, with Kirito close behind, and with a bang, they landed in a deep snow drift.

Lyfa was the first to recover and struggle out of the snowbank, and, upon looking up, she saw not the moon and stars but a canopy of stone extending as far as she could see. 'No wonder I couldn't fly, this is a cave,' Lyfa thought as she inspected her surroundings.

As she continued to look around, an abnormal shape appeared near the snow bank where she had first fallen. It was undoubtedly an «evil-god class monster», which she had previously only seen in pictures.

Next to her, Kirito poked his head out of the snow. Before he could say anything, she quickly covered his mouth, understanding their dire situation. They were in the endless underground world, «Jötunheimr», the most difficult field in ALO. In other words, that giant earthworm wasn't a trap to capture prey for food, but to transport players here to this land of ice.

The nearly five story building tall, multi-legged evil-god finally moved away. Lyfa's group then found this shrine to hide in, and pondered what to do. Unfortunately, there was no quick and easy way to leave this place when flight was prohibited. They had been looking at the fire while sitting with their back to the wall for about an hour, which brought things to the present.

"Well... before I can make an escape plan, I need to know about Jötunheimr considering I have zero knowledge about this field..."

Kirito finally drove away his drowsiness, looked out into the darkness with sharp black eyes, and spoke.

"Indeed, before coming here, the Sylph lord said something when I handed over the coins. 'I think to earn this much money, you'd need to hunt evil-gods in Jötunheimr,' or something like that."

"Ah, yes, she said that."

Lyfa nodded her head, recalling the memory.

Before getting swallowed by the worm, Kirito and Lyfa had met with the Sylph and Cait Sith Lords at their conference and fought off a large hostile force of Salamanders who had attacked them in surprise. Afterward, Kirito had given the same lords a large sum of money when he heard that they lacked funds. While accepting these funds, the Sylph lord Sakuya had certainly made some remark resembling that.

"...Having said that, Kirito-kun, where did you get all that money?"

The unexpected question derailed Kirito's train of thought and caused him to stumble over his words.

"That, ahh, some people I knew gave it to me. They used to play this game a lot in the past, but now have quit playing..."

"Well, if you say so..."

It was a common enough story. A player, retiring from the game, gave his money and equipment to friends or acquaintances. Lyfa decided to believe it and returned to their original conversation.

"Then what is the problem? What is it about Sakuya's speech?"

"Well, if the lord said something like that, then there must be players hunting in this field right?"

"There should be some."

"Thus, in addition to the giant earthworm which acts as a one way trip, there should be another way to enter and exit this field."

Finally understanding what Kirito was getting at, she nodded in affirmation.

"There seems to be... but like you this is my first time here so I haven't been there. In Aarun city there are large dungeons to the East, West, South and North, with their deepest floors supposedly having stairs leading to Jötunheimr. The location should be..."

Lyfa called up the menu with her left hand and opened the map. She could see that Jötunheimr appeared to be nearly circular, with everything around them except their current location grayed out since she hadn't been there before. She touched the map with her right index finger, indicating points at the top, bottom, left, and right.

"They should be here, here, here and here. We are now in a shrine between the center and the southwest wall, so the nearest stairs should be to the South or West. But..."

Lyfa slumped her shoulders before making her next remark.

"All of the dungeons stairs will have evil-god class guardians there."

"Those evil-gods, how strong are they?"

Lyfa looked incredulously at Kirito before answering his question.

"No matter how strong you are, this time it won't be enough. Rumor has it that when this area first opened, the Salamanders sent down a large party. They were completely wiped out by the first Evil-god class monster they met. General Eugene, who even you struggled against, didn't last more than ten seconds against it."

"...That certainly is something..."

"To hunt here, you have to have heavily armored players as human shields, high-powered attackers, and at least eight players focusing on support and recovery. We are two lightly armed swordsmen; before we could do anything we would be trampled flat and killed."

"I would like to avoid that."

Kirito nodded, but hearing about that kind of challenge seemed to have gotten him so excited that even his nostrils were twitching. Lyfa, seeing this, made sure to add another warning.

"But before that, there's a 99% chance we won't reach the stairs. Running this long distance will draw evil-gods, and we will be dead before we can target them."

"I see...and we can't fly in this map."

"Yes. To restore the power of flight, we would need either sunlight or moonlight. But as you can see, neither one of those is available here...The only exception is Imp players, who can fly a little bit underground..."

Here, her words cut off and they looked at each others' wings. Sylph Lyfa's dark green wings and Spriggan Kirito's grey wings had both lost their luminescence and withered. The only thing that marked them as fairies were their pointed ears, as they could not fly.

"So, our last hope is to meet one of those large-scale evil-god hunting teams Lyfa mentioned earlier, join with them, and make our way back above ground."

"That sounds about right."

Lyfa turned her gaze outside the small shrine as she nodded.

Through the thin blue darkness, past an expansive forest of snow and ice, stood a fortress-like building. Of course, it was controlled by the most powerful Boss-class evil-god and its minions; going close to that place

would mean a very unpleasant death. Naturally, no other players could be found in the area.

"This Jötunheimr replaced the above ground dungeons as the highest level in difficulty. It was just recently added. So, the number of times that a hunting party has come down here is apparently less than ten. The chance of them accidentally coming near this shrine might be lower than us defeating a evil-god class monster alone."

"I guess this will be a real test of our luck."

Kirito gave a weak smile, then used his right index finger to poke the head of the nearly ten centimeter tall girl sleeping in his lap.

"Hey Yui...wake up."

After blinking her eyes with their long eyelashes two or three times, her small body wrapped in a pink dress abruptly shot up. She put her right hand on her cheek, stretched her left arm high above her, and gave a big yawn. This gesture was so lovely that Lyfa could only stare in fascination.

"Fuwaaa...Good morning Papa, Lyfa-san."

The little fairy greeted them in her bell-like voice. Kirito spoke to her very gently.

"Good morning, Yui. Unfortunately, it is still night, and we are still underground. Sorry to bother you, but could you search for other players near us?"

"Yes, understood. Please wait..."

Yui nodded her head and closed her eyes.

The official name for the little fairy, Yui, that Kirito carried around was a «Navigation Pixie». As long as players paid an additional fee, they could summon one from the menu window. Though from what Lyfa has heard, navigation pixies should only give basic information that the system deemed relevant. They should also speak in a synthesized voice and have no emotions. She had never heard of one with a personality or even a name.

'If you constantly summon the same navigation pixie for a long time, does it get this friendly?' thought Lyfa while awaiting Yui's reply.

When she opened her eyes, her ears drooped in disappointment, and she shook her glossy long raven-colored hair.

"I'm sorry, I can see no response indicating other players in the range of my data collection. Before that, if I had just noticed that that village wasn't registered on the map..."

Seeing the little fairy hang her head dejectedly from her perch on Kirito's right knee, Lyfa used her fingertips to gently stroke Yui's head.

"No, it's not your fault, Yui-chan. At that time I asked you to warn us of nearby players as first priority. You don't need to sound so sad."

"...Thank you, Lyfa-san."

Looking at Yui's moist eyes, Lyfa found it hard to believe the little pixie was just a simple piece of program code. She flashed a smile from her heart, touched Yui`s little face, and turned her attention back to Kirito.

"Well, since it has come to this, all we can do is try our best."

"Try... try what?"

Lyfa gave Kirito, who could only blink in confusion, a fearless smile.

"I just want to try it— Whether or not the two of us can reach the stairs leading above ground. Sitting here is just a waste of time."

"But, but, you just said it was absolutely impossible..."

"I said that it was 99% impossible. But I want to take a risk on that 1% possibility. As long as we figure out how the Evil-gods move and stay out of their view, careful forward movement should be possible."

"Lyfa-san, you are awesome!"

Yui clapped her hands, and Lyfa responded with a wink before standing up.

However, Kirito grabbed Lyfa`s sleeve and drew her back.

"Wh-what?"

Lyfa tumbled back to her seat. She started to protest, but the dark eyes staring into her own from nearby quieted her. As he held her gaze, the until-now relaxed Kirito addressed her in a firm tone.

"No, you should log out now. I will protect your avatar until it disappears."

"Eh?! Wh-why?"

"It is now half past two. Didn't you say that you are a student? Today, you have been in FullDive over eight hours for me. I can't let you stay with me any longer."

"..."

The suddenness of Kirito's comments left her grasping for words, but he merely looked at her and calmly continued to speak.

"Even going straight we don't know how long this will take. If we avoid the very large monsters' detection range, it will increase our travel distance. Even if we reached the stairs, it would be around morning. I have a reason that I must go to Aarun, but today is a weekday, so I think you better log off. "

"No, I'm okay. Just one all-nighter..."

Forcing a smile, Lyfa shook her head.

Kirito, letting go of Lyfa's sleeve, lowered his head to make his final speech.

"Thank you for coming this far with me, Lyfa. If it weren't for you, I would probably have taken several days just to gather information. But thanks to you, I only needed half a day to get here. No matter how much I thank you it wouldn't be enough."

"..."

Unable to fight back the pain in her chest born from these surprising comments, Lyfa could only ineffectually clench her fists.

Lyfa was uncertain why these words hurt her so deeply, but her mouth moved instinctively and roughly spat out words.

"...I'm not doing this just for you."

"Eh?"

Kirito raised his face. Lyfa avoided eye contact with him and continued in a hard voice.

"I... I wanted to come, that's how I ended up here. I hope you understand that at least. What is this about forced journey? Do you think I hated coming all this way with you?"

Her welling of emotion was detected by the AmuSphere, and it tried to make a film of tears cover her eyes— She was forced to blink rapidly to clear them. To escape from Yui's panicked looks between her and Kirito, Lyfa turned toward the shrine's entrance and stood up.

"I... think today's adventure was the best I have had in ALO. There were a lot of exciting things. Finally, I too began to think that this world is another reality, I was starting to believe!"

Lyfa wiped her eyes with her right hand, and was about to go outside when suddenly—

A huge, strange sound that was neither thunder nor earthquake came from a short distance away.

"BORURURU!" That roar, was no doubt from the mouth of a huge monster. Subsequently, the ground began to shake, and there was a roaring sound of footsteps.

'Oh no! My shouts earlier must have attracted an evil-god! I'm so stupid, stupid!' While mentally blaming herself, Lyfa quickly decided to bait the monster away by running.

Kirito interrupted her by grabbing her left wrist— Lyfa didn't even know when he had gotten behind her. His firm grip prevented her from running out into the field.

"Let me go! I will pull the enemy, and you can use that gap to get out of here..."

Lyfa urged Kirito in a low voice, but he caught sight of something and he cautioned Lyfa.

"No, wait. This is a bit strange."

"Strange, what is..."

"It's not just one."

After hearing this, Lyfa listened carefully; indeed, there were two evil-god roars. One was a giant engine producing a low bass, but that was also mixed with a wooden flute-like wind sound. Lyfa held her breath, then shook off Kirito's restraining hand.

"If there are two it's even worse! If either targets you it will be too late! After you die, you have to restart from Sylvain again!"

"No, that's not it, Lyfa-san!"

That small shout came from Yui, who sat on Kirito's shoulder.

"The two evil-god class monsters nearby... they are fighting each other!"

"Eh?!"

Lyfa quickly closed her eyes and concentrated on listening. Indeed, the roaring footsteps did not sound like a gallop issued by going in a straight line but rather like it was moving around irregularly.

"B..but, monsters fighting each other, how..."

Lyfa murmured in awe, completely forgot about the sadness in her chest. Kirito seemed to have decided on something and spoke up.

"Let's go and see. This shrine won't be much of a refuge anyway."

"That's true."

Lyfa nodded and placed her hand on the hilt of the katana at her waist then followed Kirito out into the darkness filled with dancing snow.

After running only a few steps, the noise resolved itself into two evil-god class monsters. They slowly approached from the east of the shrine, their movements like the shaking of small mountains. Almost twenty meters tall, both were the blue-grey unique to evil-gods.

Upon taking a closer look, the two evil-gods were different in size. The one issuing the "BORURURU!" sound was the larger of the two, about twice the height of the other, a smaller monster making a chirping "Hyuruhyuru!" sound.

The larger one was vaguely human shaped but had three faces lined up vertically as well as four arms, two on each side— it could be called a giant. Each of the angular faces gave the impression of a pagan god. As each face made its cry, all three together made the continuous, engine-like "BORUBORU" sound. In each of the beast's four hands held a sword that seemed more like a steel girder, the huge, heavy blades being swung as if they were weightless.

In contrast, it was harder to understand what the smaller monster was modeled after. Large ears, a long elephant-like trunk, and a body as flat as a bun supported by twenty legs ending in hooked claws. The overall impression was of an elephant-headed jellyfish.

It extended hook claws to pressure the three-faced giant, but the other's four iron swords swung at the speed of storm and easily blocked the

offensive. The claws futilely attempted to reach the giant's faces. On the other hand, the giant's blade easily hurt the body of the jellyfish-like monster, dark body fluids flying off like mist.

"Wha...What's going on..."

Lyfa whispered in surprise, completely forgetting to hide due to her astonishment.

In ALO, battles between monsters could occur but only for three reasons. First, if one monster was domesticated by a Cait Sith player with high taming skill; in other words, a «pet». Second, if a Puca played a melody that either confused or agitated the monster. And third, if one of the monsters was hypnotized by illusion-type magic and forced to fight.

In the battle taking place in front of them, none of these appeared to be the case. If one of the monsters was a pet, its cursor should have been yellow-green, but both of the evil-gods had yellow cursors. No music could be heard over the rumbling of the ground and the screams filling the air, and none of the light effects caused by illusion magic were present.

Not seeming to notice Lyfa's group at all, the two evil-gods continued their intense battle. However, the three-faced giant appeared to have an advantage, while the movement of the elephant jellyfish appeared sluggish. Finally, with a swing of its sword, the giant cut off one of the jellyfish's taloned legs, the limb falling to the ground near Lyfa with a ground-shaking impact.

"Hey, doesn't it seem a bit dangerous to stay here...?"

Kirito whispered beside her, Lyfa nodded but couldn't make herself move. The blood from the wounds sprayed onto the white snow, dyeing it black, and Lyfa couldn't take her eyes off the elephant headed evil-god.

The jellyfish's injuries forced it to cry out shrilly as it tried to run away again. The giant wouldn't let it get away however, swinging the iron swords more powerfully at the body of the jellyfish. Unable to withstand the pressure, the jellyfish cried out as it crouched on the ground, its cries became weaker and weaker. The giant kept mercilessly swinging its swords, engraving cruel wounds on the gray skin of the jellyfish.

"...Help it, Kirito-kun."

Listening to those words coming out of her mouth, Lyfa was surprised at herself. The expression on Kirito's face was three times more surprised than her. Looking at her and the two evil-gods, he questioned her in a bewildered voice.

"Which one?"

Indeed, compared to the three-face giant, the jellyfish had a stranger form. But in this situation, there was no need for hesitation.

"Of course, the one being bullied."

Lyfa immediately answered, but Kirito responded with a very natural question.

"How?"

"Well..."

Lyfa had no immediate response. Mostly due to the fact that she didn't have any idea of what to do. During Lyfa's period of indecisiveness, more wounds appeared on the back of the blue-gray, elephant-headed evil-god.

"...Kirito-kun, do something!!"

Lyfa cried as she clasped both hands to her chest. The Spriggan boy could do nothing but scratch his black hair.

"Even if you say do something..."

Suddenly, Kirito's hand stopped moving and he stared at the evil-gods again. Eyes squinting slightly, the flashing in his shiny black eyes reflected the speed of the thoughts running through his brain.

"...A form like that, if it has any meaning...."

Kirito muttered. Then, looking around the area, he whispered to Yui sitting on his shoulder.

"Yui, is there water nearby? A river or lake is fine!"

Hearing that, the pixie closed her eyes without asking for a reason and started nodding her head almost immediately.

"There is, Papa! About two hundred meters to the north, there is a frozen lake!"

"Good...Lyfa, run there like your life depends on it."

"Uh...Huh?"

It looked like Kirito was talking about the form of the giant with three faces and four arms, but what did water have to do with it?

Lyfa was puzzled, but Kirito did not say anything as he bent over and pulled a long, fat nail out his belt. 'It must be a throwing pick,' thought Lyfa despite never having seen such a thing used before. Because ALO had very powerful long-range attack magic spells, there was no point to training simple long-ranged weapon skills.

Kirito was doing it for real, however. He twirled the twelve centimeter pick over his shoulder, holding it with just his fingertips.

"...There!"

With a shout, Kirito's right arm moved faster than she could see, and the iron needle flew straight with a stream of blue light...

The missile hit right between the shiny, dark-red eyes of the highest face of the three-faced giant.

Lyfa was surprised, as her careful observation of the giant's HP bar showed that its health was reduced very slightly. Such a tiny weapon penetrating an Evil-god class monster's overwhelming armor could not be done without very high throwing skill.

While that damage was nothing to the huge HP bar of the evil-god, that it was doing any damage at all that is important here because—

"BOBOBORURURURU!"

A roar of anger came from the three-faced giant as all six eyes focused on Kirito and Lyfa, signaling the change of target from the jellyfish to players.

"...Run for your life!!"

Kirito shouted as he ran northward, spraying snow in all directions as he took off at top speed.

"Wai..."

As Lyfa's mouth moved, she hurriedly followed the Spriggan who was sprinting far ahead. Then, from right behind her came a roar like thunder

and the sound of something heavy trampling the ground. The giant was chasing after the two of them.

"Wait...Noooooooo!"

Lyfa screamed as she dashed at top speed. However, Kirito running ahead of her had a form that even Olympic sprinters would envy as he pulled further and further away from Lyfa. She had experienced his running speed as they escaped «Ruger Corridor», but being left behind was a different matter.

"Sooo meeean!"

While Lyfa was yelling desperately, the huge shaking sound behind her was getting closer. The evil-god was about thirteen times as tall as her, so each of his steps was about the same ratio compared to Lyfa's. Her fear of that steel beam size sword that might be swinging at her even now made Lyfa push her entire body to the limit— that is, her brain's movement signals worked faster in an attempt to catch up to Kirito.

Suddenly, ahead of her, the black-clad youth stopped in a cloud of snow. He turned and caught Lyfa in his extended arms. Despite their dire straights, Lyfa could feel her face heating up as she turned to look behind them.

The three-faced giant was close enough to be frightening. It would catch up in just a few seconds. If they were to be hit with those iron swords, the lightly armored Kirito and Lyfa would lose all their HP in a single hit.

'...What on earth do you want to do!!?'

Lyfa wanted to ask Kirito, who was holding her close to him. At the same time...

Crackcrackcrack...sounded the ground as it exploded outward.

The giant's legs, as large as tree trunks, had broken through the ice lying beneath the snow. Kirito had stopped in the center of a vast frozen lake that was covered by snow.

The ice for 15 meters around the evil-god sank, exposing transparent dark water. The three-faced giant plummeted into his self-made lake causing a ridiculously large column of water to splash into the air.

"Just sink like that..."

Lyfa desperately begged, but that easy solution didn't occur. One and a half of its faces appeared above water, and it slowly came closer. It seemed that below the water its lower two arms were acting as paddles; despite its rock-like body, it certainly could swim well. If Kirito was betting on the evil-god drowning, it seemed that he'd lost.

Wanting to start running again, Lyfa turned around only to notice Kirito standing motionless. He held onto Lyfa hard enough to activate the harassment warning, but Kirito remained staring at the giant.

"...Ah, you, couldn't possibly..."

'He wants to die here.'

That thought flashed through Lyfa's mind.

He couldn't be doing what Lyfa had attempted earlier, sacrificing himself to let Lyfa log out, dying and returning to the save point in the Sylph capital, Sylvain.

Lyfa couldn't allow that. Kirito had a very strong reason to go to Aarun, or more specifically, the «World Tree», as she'd found out during their one day of travel. The Spriggan boy's only reason for playing ALO was for the purpose of meeting someone up there, and he had surpassed many obstacles to get this far.

"No, you must escape..."

Lyfa weakly cried while trying to escape from his arms, but she was cut off by another splashing sound.

Startled, she turned her head and saw a new column of water appear behind the three-faced giant.

"Yururururu!" That roar was definitely from the elephant-headed evil-god that the three-faced giant had tormented earlier. Even though they had pulled the giant away, it had chased after the three-faced giant rather than escape.

Lyfa instantly forgot her situation, her eyes going wide from astonishment as she saw—

Cutting the water, around twenty limbs raised up and coiled around the face and arms of the giant.

"BORUBORU!" The giant angrily roared, trying to swing around its iron swords. However, they moved slowly in water and could not cut the jellyfish's skin.

"...I, I see..."

Lyfa whispered hoarsely.

The elephant-faced jellyfish evil-god was originally an aquatic monster. When on land, most of its limbs were needed to support that huge bowl-shaped body. Now that it is in the lake, with its body floating in the water, all of its limbs are being used to attack. The giant on the other hand, needed to use two of its arms to swim, reducing its offensive power by 50%.

The «form» Kirito was talking about was actually referring to the jellyfish evil-god. Realizing that it was completely natural for a jellyfish to be in water, Lyfa was disillusioned that she wasn't able to notice it herself so she clasped both hands tightly.

The elephant head evil-god was like a fish in water, the jellyfish's power forced the three-faced giant's head under water. The two super-sized monsters' violent fight caused high waves, spraying large quantities of water and ice in all directions.

The elephant jellyfish gave an intense roar, its body shining with a blue white light. The light changed into sparks which flowed along its twenty limbs.

"Ah..."

"Alright!"

Kirito and Lyfa both shouted at the same time. The three-faced giant's HP started decreasing with tremendous speed. Using the identification skill, they could see what amounted to hundreds of thousands of health points disappearing every time the electricity sparked.

It might have been the giant's blood boiling, but there were several flashes of red under water with columns of steam going up; these had no effect in the jellyfish evil-god's HP. Eventually, the frequency of the "BORUBORU" cries slowed to a stop— followed by an explosion of polygons large enough to block Lyfa's vision.

Lyfa averted her eyes for a moment, and when she turned back there was only one cursor displayed.

"Yurururururuuuu..." With a cry of triumph, the elephant jellyfish lifted its numerous legs, then returned them to the water and began swimming smoothly through the lake.

Water streamed down the huge body like a waterfall as it dragged itself onto the bank then walked on the ice toward them. Lyfa held her breath while watching.

With "Don Don" swaying footsteps it approached, stopping right in front of them— Lyfa was once again stunned at its huge size. When fighting the giant, the giant tentacles had seemed like thin limbs, but up close she realized she couldn't surround one with her arms spread wide. High above those tree-trunk-like limbs should be its round body, but only its contour could be seen.

No matter how you looked at it, its head was that of an elephant. Instead of ears hanging down the sides of its face, it had round, limb-like appendages covered with frills that must be gills. Below its round face hung a nose as long as its limbs. The eyes were a little creepy with three round jet-black lenses side by side. Lined up like riceballs they actually gave it a humorous looking expression.

"...So, what should we do now?" Kirito muttered.

Lyfa had indeed said to save the elephant-like monster, but she hadn't thought of what to do afterward. The fearsome evil-god before her eyes had a yellow cursor, indicating that it was hostile, and it could probably kill both of them with one step of its clawed feet.

However, the fact that it hadn't attacked them already could be said to be an irregular development. When it came to the advanced dungeons like Jötunheimr, it was normal for all monsters to attack players the moment they saw them. Since it hadn't done that, the elephant-jellyfish might leave if they just waited...

Lyfa's thinking was betrayed one second later. With a "Yurururu" sound, the evil-god stretched out its long nose to the two of them.

"Ack..."

While Kirito was backing away, Yui, who had remained silent until now, grabbed Kirito's ear and attempted to calm the Spriggan.

"It's okay, Papa. This child is not angry."

'...Child?' thought Lyfa, but she soon found herself without the time to ponder that question further.

The long nose gently wound around the two people and slowly lifted them off of the ground.

"Hieeee!"

Kirito yelled while Lyfa was speechless. The elephant evil-god slowly lifted them several tens of meters in the air and looked as if it would place them in its mouth— luckily that didn't happen; it merely dropped them on its back.

They landed on their behinds and bounced once before coming to rest. Seen from afar, the elephant jellyfish's body was smooth, but their current proximity revealed that it was covered with gray hair. Seeing Kirito and Lyfa sitting in the middle of its back, the elephant jellyfish seem satisfied. It made a pleased sound before moving along like nothing happened.

"..."

Lyfa and Kirito looked at each other once before the Sylph girl gave up trying to analyze the current situation, opting instead to leisurely view the surrounding landscape.

The dark kingdom of Jotunheimr was not completely dark. The ceiling was covered with icicles that released a pale glow. Pale blue light illuminated the snow-covered landscape, and despite this being a ultra-hazardous area, it was very beautiful. An old castle in the center of a black forest, steep cliffs, the tower built to connect this world to the world above ground. Lyfa could see all these clearly from her perch tens of meters above ground.

The elephant jellyfish walked on its twenty limbs and after a minute of traveling on its wobbly back, Kirito whispered a query to his companion.

"So this is...the start of a quest?"

"Well..."

Looking a bit puzzled, Lyfa formulated a quiet reply.

"If this were a quest, when it is started, it should display a Start-log in this area..."

Lyfa waved her left hand around her upper left field of view.

"Since it's not displayed here, it isn't a request type of quest. If that's so, then it's probably an event type...This could be slightly troublesome."

"In what way?"

"If it is a quest, there will always be some sort of reward at the end. But an event is more like the player is participating in a drama— there is not always a happy ending."

"...You mean to say we may end up with one of the tragic endings, right?"

"It's possible. Before, I made a wrong choice in a horror type event and I died when a witch boiled me in her pot."

"What an interesting game."

Kirito gave a laugh and put on a tight smile, beginning to stroke the thick hair beneath him.

"...Well, since this happened we might as well ride the boat out— No, that would be jellyfish. Anyway, even if we jumped down from this height we would take some serious damage, so we might as well ride it to the end...Well, this, that is, it might be a bit late..."

"Wh, what?"

Lyfa gave a perplexed look to the Spriggan boy. Kirito hung his head as he responded.

"...I'm sorry about earlier, Lyfa. I made light of your feelings...Well, I might have looked down on this world and not approached it seriously enough. It's only a game...But be it real or virtual, what you feel and think are all real, I should know that already..."

Kirito, who had his head down, wore a sad expression on his face.

Lyfa looked at him from the side and couldn't help feeling a touch of déjà vu, thinking she had seen that expression before. Lyfa dismissed that feeling and shook her head many times.

"Y, yes...I'm sorry too...You worked really hard to save me and my race. 'ALO is just a game', you would never think like that, I should understand it most..."

«VRMMO-RPGs», including ALFheimOnline, were a whole new genre of game— Somewhere it might be testing their players. Lately, Lyfa strongly felt like that.

Testing, to exaggerate, meant that it was probably a challenge. Because it was a game, you couldn't always win. Sometimes traps from hostile races stopped your forward progress, or they just attacked you from the front and wipe you out.

At that time, how seriously you struggle or if you could hold your chest high even in defeat, this game is testing that. In the previous flat panel display (Computer MMORPGs), other than motion commands, your avatar wouldn't change a bit;, you just typed in chat about your defeat whichever way you wanted. Now, under FullDive, the avatar faithfully reproduced the feelings of the player. It was even possible to shed tears of mortification.

Many people hated to be seen showing their true feelings; when a situation turned against them some tried to laugh it off, with many logging out at the instant of defeat. Even Lyfa didn't want anyone to see her crying face if she could help it.

But the mysterious Spriggan in front of her had no connection with the thought process previously mentioned. Even when trapped by the Salamander's one sided attack in the Ruger Corridor or during the fight with General Eugene where he was pushed back by the demonic sword, he never hesitated to show his anger and regret. He just did what he had to do, overcame any obstacles in his path and ultimately won. It would not be possible to do this for a person who made light of this world as «just a game».

"...Hey, you..."

'Before you came here, what kind of game were you in? What kind of person are you in reality?'

She wanted to ask that, but kept her lips tight. In VRMMOs, asking questions about someone's reality was something that even a very close friend should refrain from doing.

As Kirito tilted his head in her direction, she just shook her head and smiled, silently saying 'It's nothing.'

"...Well, we're decided now. I can stay as long as we need. School attendance is already optional for me."

Finished, Lyfa offered her right hand. 'I see,' Kirito seemed to say with a laugh before he shook her hand. Lyfa was constantly shaking her head to hide her blushing cheeks. She became aware of Yui, who was sitting on Kirito's shoulder laughing happily, and Lyfa became even more embarrassed. When she removed her hand, even the tips of her ears were hot, so she turned her head away.

Not caring about the three's exchange on its back, the evil-god continued moving forward rapidly. Looking into the distance, Lyfa instantly forgot that hot feeling on her face, and her brow furrowed.

"What happened?"

At Kirito's voice, Lyfa extended her right hand, pointing into the distance.

"Remember what I said about going to the closest stairs to the west or south? This child seems to be going the opposite direction...Look there."

In the direction Lyfa was pointing, a giant silhouette began to emerge from the darkness. Forming an arc in the ceiling of Jötunheimr, a huge conic structure hung. Like a net, branches knit and wove together to hold a huge icicle in place.

Judging from the hazy effect of distance, it was at least ten kilometers away, but the huge size completely disrupted a player's sense of distance. Several luminous points were trapped within the icicle, giving the illusion of a gigantic eye blinking majestically.

"...What is that winding thing inside the icicle...?"

"I've only seen it in a photograph... That must be the roots of the World Tree."

"What...?"

Lyfa's eyes narrowed and she sent a sharp look at Kirito's profile, before her commentary continued:

"The roots which went through the ground of Alfheim hang down from the roof of Jötunheimr. So instead of going to the edge of Jötunheimr, this evil-god is taking us right to the center."

"Hmm... The World Tree, but that happens to be our final destination... So if we climb the roots, will we be able to get out of here?"

"I've never heard of it. In the first place, look there— The roots only extend halfway between the ceiling and the ground. That means it is more than 200 meters off of the ground. Since we can't fly in this field, that height absolutely can not be reached."

"I see..."

After a small sigh, Kirito finally laughed helplessly.

"Well, now we just have to leave it to this weevil or bathynomus giganteus. Either we will be welcomed in the Dragon's Palace[2], or we will become their breakfast."

"Hey, wait a minute. What do you mean bathyno whatever? It should be elephant or jellyfish."

When Lyfa pouted and retorted, Kirito just lifted his eyebrows at her unexpected response.

"Oh, you don't know? Its other name is giant isopod...It lives in deep sea, it looks like an Armadillidium vulgare[3] this size..."

Kirito spread his arms out to about hugging length. Lyfa's upper body shook as she rushed to change the topic.

"I understand, let's give it a name! A cute name!"

With a round head and and the lower body of tentacles, elephant-like name, elephant-like name...Lyfa thought really hard on it.

'Yuuzou'... no... 'Zooringen'... not that either...

"Then, Tonkii."

Kirito suddenly said, earning a blank stare from Lyfa. It sure was a cute name, but how on earth did he think of it? —Elephant Tonkii, the name sounded familiar.

The answer came to her in two seconds flat once she started rummaging through her memory. When she was little, she had a picture book, that was the name of an elephant in it. In the book, at the end of the long-ago war, an order had been given to dispose of fierce animals at the zoo. While crying, the zoo keeper put the poison in the animal's feed, but smart elephant Tonkii didn't eat it; it died starving while receiving repeating cheers, that was the plot of the story. Whenever her mom read that part, she couldn't help breaking out in tears.

"...I feel that name won't bring us good luck."

Lyfa whispered, Kirito also nodded his head with a sorry look on his face.

"That may be so, but that was the first thing that came to mind."

"Oh, so you know about that picture book too. Well, ok. Let's use that."

Lyfa clapped her hands, then patted the short hairs near her feet.

"Hey, evil-god-kun, from now on you will be called Tonkii."

Of course, the monster gave no response, but it didn't refuse so they assumed it accepted the name. If you use taming skill on this evil-god and made it a pet, then you can use the system to give it a name. However, she had never even heard of a Cait Sith who had mastered the taming skill that can make an evil-god obey.

Yui, who sat on Kirito`s shoulder, also waved her small hands, and following Lyfa, called out to the hundreds of times larger beast.

"Tonkii-san, nice to meet you! Please take care of us!"

This time, as if it understood or maybe by accident, the evil-god moved the gill flaps on both sides of its head.

The elephant jellyfish, now named Tonkii, continued north along the frozen river.

More than once or twice, they narrowly avoided encounters with other evil-gods loitering in other fields. But, for some reason, the other evil-gods looked from grove of trees or hills at them, then left.

They might have thought that Lyfa and Kirito belonged to Tonkii, but then why would that three-faced evil-god attack Tonkii in the first place? There

might have been one or two evil-gods that were the same type as Tonkii, but most of them had forms different from either Tonkii or the giant.

Lyfa turned to her side, wanting to get Kirito's opinion, but the Spriggan had his eyes closed and appeared to be nodding off again. Lyfa readied her fist again and was about to strike, when a thought occurred to her; she took a handfull of snow that had fallen on Tonkii's back.

Before the snowball object could disappear, Lyfa hurriedly shoved it down Kirito's black collar into his back.

"Cold!!"

Hit directly by the cold effect, Kirito shrieked as he jumped up. After saying 'Good Morning' to him, Lyfa asked him about her previous doubt. The Spriggan wore a reproachful look for a while, but before long he spoke while thinking.

"...In other words, even between evil-gods, the ones with human forms and those with bestial forms fight regularly..."

"Possibly... But maybe the humanoid type only attacks the evil-gods of Tonkii's type..."

The Jötunheimr field was only added a month ago as part of a major update, yet most of it is still unexplored due to the high difficulty. If it was some kind of event, it was possible that they were the first players to know of its existence. If it was a normal hunting party that had stumbled upon Tonkii's battle with the giant, they would've just watched the fight, and after Tonkii was killed, they would've probably fought the giant— that would have been the expected outcome.

"Well, only the designer and Tonkii know how this event will end, so let's just let it play out."

After saying so, Kirito flopped back down and used his hands as a pillow and crossed his legs. Yui flew from his shoulder and landed on his chest, lying down in the exact same position as the boy in black. Sighing as she noticed how relaxed the two of them were, Lyfa decided to brace them with a freezing spell if they fell asleep this time. Looking at the clock at the edge of her view, the pale green numbers already went past 3am some time ago.

So far, Lyfa had never stayed in-game later than 2:00 am, and what's ahead is unknown territory. Lyfa gently stroked the short hairs at her feet, having mixed feelings about playing an online game all night for the first time.

The strange evil-god, unaware of what was happening on its back, continued walking at a constant pace...

The advance suddenly stopped at a gentle hill covered in ice and snow.

"Uwaa..."

Moving to the front of Tonkii's head, Lyfa looked forward and unintentionally gasped in surprise.

It was a hole.

The scale wasn't ordinary. A large vertical hole so wide that the far side faded into a misty blue color. Sheer cliffs covered by thick snow and deep ice that was transparent at the top but gradually faded into a light blue color, then through blue to indigo blue and settled into a dark lacquer the further down one looked. But, no matter how one's eyes stared, the bottom was shrouded in a deep darkness, making it appear bottomless.

"...I wonder what would happen if someone fell off that..."

Kirito said in a strained voice. Yui, back on his shoulder, replied in a serious voice:

"The bottom of the structure is not defined in the map data I can access."

"Wow, it truly is a bottomless pit."

Kirito and Lyfa slowly moved back, returning to the top of Tonkii's back. Before that, the evil-god started moving again.

'- No way, does it want to throw us down the hole!?'

Lyfa screamed in her heart, but fortunately, the evil-god didn't seem to be so ungrateful. It folded its twenty legs in and kept its back horizontal as it sat down.

After a few seconds, Tonkii settled down onto the snow with a thud. Yururu, it cried in a low voice, then pulling in its long nose, Tonkii completely stopped moving.

"..."

Kirito and Lyfa glanced at each other, then gingerly climbed off its back.

After a few steps out, they turned around to look back at the jellyfish, but what was lying there was no longer either an elephant or a jellyfish. With its limbs and head tucked under its body, all it looked like was a giant steamed bun enshrined in the snow.

"...This guy, what is he doing..."

Lyfa walked forward a few steps to stand beside Kirito, who uttered that in amazement. She tapped the thick grey fur.

"Hey, Tonkii, what should we do now?!"

No answer. Lyfa swatted the evil-god's side slightly harder with her right hand and felt a slight change. When Tonkii had given them a ride, his skin had been like a urethane cushion, but now, it had become hard.

It can't be, he died when he reached his objective? Thinking that, Lyfa rushed to his side and forced her ear below his fur. A faint, periodic, bass 'boom boom, boom boom' can be heard, relieved, Lyfa removed her head from his side.

He was still alive. Lyfa turned to see his HP gauge had recovered from his battle with the three-faced giant and it's now full.

"This means... he's just sleeping? When we have been working hard all night?"

Lyfa pouted, she went up to Tonkii and was about to pull his fur in revenge, when Kirito raised his voice from behind her.

"Hey Lyfa, look at the top, it's amazing!"

"What....?"

Lyfa raised her head to look at the scene, indeed, it was an amazing sight.

The roots of the World Tree and the inverted cone they wrapped around that they had seen from far earlier were now directly overhead. Though it was still hard to estimate, the diameter of the icicle above was probably about the same as the hole stretching below. Looking very carefully, it was possible to see some sort of structure in the icicle. Transparent halls and corridors were lit by fires, casting bright blue light through the ice.

"Really, amazing... if this is all part of one dungeon, I don't doubt it is the largest in ALO."

Lyfa sighed and unconsciously reached toward it. However, there was of course a space of 200 meters or more to the bottom of the large icicle. It was a distance that even a member of the Imp race, which could fly underground, would not be able to cross.

"How do you get there..."

Lyfa asked Kirito, but before he could answer, the little pixie sitting on the black clad shoulder spoke up with a piercing voice.

"Papa, there are other players approaching from the east! One... no behind that are... twenty-three!"

"...!!"

Lyfa took a deep breath.

Twenty-four people. This is obviously a party formed for hunting evil-gods.

Originally, they are what we wished to encounter. If we told them our situation and they let us join, we could use the dungeon with stairs and escape aboveground.

However, now. In a word, the purpose of players who approach in this situation...

Lyfa bit her lip, staring eastward, and after a few seconds, heard the faint rustling sound of feet moving through snow. It was a sound that would have been inaudible if not for her acute hearing as a member of the Sylph race. She could not see them, so they are probably using stealth magic.

Lyfa quickly held up her hands, preparing to use the magic that would allow her to see them. However, a space no more than ten meters away started to distort like a film of water. A single player appeared.

He was a man with pale white skin that had a bluish cast and long, light blue hair. There was no doubt, he was an Undine. The engravings on his grey leather armor mimicked the appearance of scales, and a small bow hung from his shoulder.

This man is probably responsible for reconnaissance and locating the enemy's position, in other words a scout. Judging from his supple

movement and high-grade equipment, you could tell he was a high ranking player.

With a sharp glint in his eyes, the scout stepped forward and said the words Lyfa most feared.

"You guys, that evil-god, are you going to hunt it or not?"

Of course, he was refering to Tonkii, who was curled up in a ball next to Lyfa.

When Lyfa did not answer, the man's countenance grew even sharper, and he continued.

"If you are going to kill it, then do it quickly. Otherwise, get out of the way, or you will get caught up in our ranged attacks."

Before finishing those words, many footsteps sounded from the ridge behind the man. It seems the main force of the party had caught up.

If they were a party formed by mixed races in the neutral zone, there was still hope...

But Lyfa's hopes were quickly betrayed as more than twenty players walked across the snow. They all had the same white skin and blue hair. In other words, they were an elite Undine evil-god hunting team, probably from «Crescent Moon Bay», far to the east.

If it was a mixed force formed by «renegades» who had left their territory, they might have overlooked the combination of a Sylph and a Spriggan. But if they were all honorable members of the Undine race, they wouldn't be quite so nice. They might actually accumulate "honor points" if they kill the mixed group of Lyfa and Kirito. They would probably just consider the two of them fair game. Thus we could be thankful they bothered to warn us.

'- But, for now we just have to be unreasonable. We couldn't let them kill our companion, Tonkii.'

Lyfa thought so from the bottom of her heart, and moved between Tonkii and the blue-haired scout, and said in a low voice:

"...I ask at the risk of bad manners. This evil-god, let us have it."

Hearing that, the man and the battalion of players behind him showed a light, bitter smile.

"In the lower-level hunting grounds maybe, but saying this in Jötunheimr is something else. 'This place is mine' and 'This monster is mine' have no meaning here. If you came here, you should be a veteran and should understand."

What the man was saying was quite right. Insisting on the right to a field or monster, if the situation was reversed Lyfa would be amazed too. Of course, priority was granted when in battle with a monster, but right now Tonkii was just curled up and the Undines want to attack, Lyfa had no right to interfere.

It was painful. As Lyfa was biting her lips, a shadow moved forward. It was Kirito.

Lyfa suddenly sucked in a deep breath. No way, was he going to do something unreasonable again, like when he confronted General Eugene and the Salamanders, that was— would he fight them? Would he draw his sword against so many opponents?

It would be a useless fight. There were twenty-four players in front of them, and they must all be super veterans or they wouldn't be here in Jötunheimr. They were on a completely different level then those Salamanders in the Ruger corridor. Heavily armored warriors and mages with their staffs showed the difference clearly.

However, the actions taken by Kirito were totally unexpected.

The black clad Spriggan, without touching his sword, knelt on the snow and bowed his head.

"I beg of you."

The voice that left his mouth was entirely serious.

"...Although the cursor is yellow, this evil-god is our companion... No, our friend. We came all the way here after it almost died. Till the end, we want it to do what it has to."

With that, Kirito bowed his head more deeply, the blue haired scout closed his eyes for a second.

When he opened them, he let out an enormous gale of laughter. A laugh quickly echoed by the pack of players approaching from behind him.

"Hey... hey, are you really a player? You`re not a NPC, right?"

With a final laugh, the scout spread his hands and shook his head. Then reached over his shoulder and removed his elegantly designed bow. He drew a silver arrow from his quiver and notched it to his bow.

"...Sorry, but we are not just playing around in this field. Just a little while ago, we were wiped out by a huge evil-god. It was very hard to collect all the Remain Lights and restore our party. When I see easy prey in front of me, I want to hunt it. Because I'm a nice guy... I'll give you ten seconds to get out of the way. When that time is over, we won't see you anymore. Mage team, begin casting support magic."

The man waved his hand, and the players in the back row began casting spells. One after another, colorful light effects appeared, granting various stat boosts to the warriors.

"Ten...Nine... Eight..."

The noise level increased severalfold with the sound of the magic as the scout's loud countdown began.

Lyfa`s fists clenched so hard her knuckles creaked and her whole body trembled with anger. Facing Kirito's back, Lyfa exclaimed:

"...Let's back up, Kirito."

"...Ok."

Kirito whispered with his head down, he turned west, moving along the edge of the bottomless pit. Lyfa also walked with him, side by side. The scout continued the countdown behind them.

"Three...Two... One... Begin attacking."

With no fighting spirit, she heard the calm instruction, and after that...

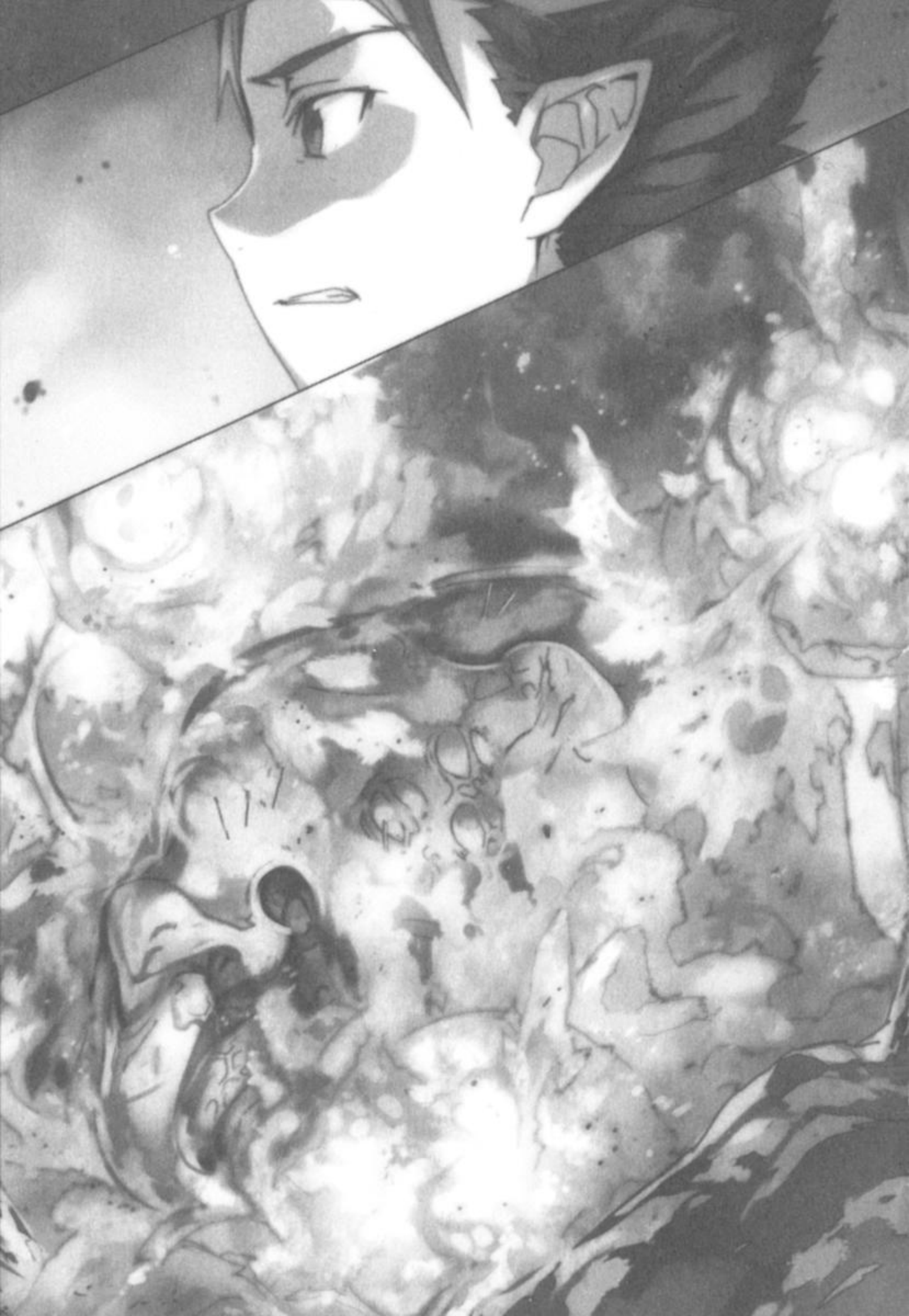
The sound of ferocious attack magics overlapped with metallic sounds that echoed as the warriors launched their assault.

Right behind their backs, a succession of overwhelming explosions shook the ground followed by a blast of hot air that sent Lyfa's green ponytail streaming in front of her.

Kirito and Lyfa turned after they had moved about 30 steps away.

At that moment, the warriors' swords, axes, spears and other weapons hit Tonkii's big body, one after another. Intense light effects and heavy impact sound effects followed the attacks. Despite having the defense of an evil-god, the repeated attacks from players with high-level equipment was taking its toll. Tonkii's HP steadily decreased.

The eight warriors continued to attack for several seconds before moving back some distance. As soon as the warriors moved away, the second volley of attack magic was completed and released along with arrows from several archers.



The magic caused a terrible explosion which completely swallowed Tonkii, even though he was more than four meters in height. With a pillar of flame, the glossy fur was burnt, scorching it. With that, around ten percent of Tonkii's total HP was gone.

Over the sound of the flames, they could hear the flute-like Yururuuu, Yururuuu, roar.

That was definitely Tonkii's cry. It was even thinner and more tragic than when he was being overwhelmed by the three-faced evil-god.

Not wanting to watch any more, Lyfa turned her face to the left.

Doing that, a scene that pricked her heart was seen. Kirito stood with his hands in fists, from his breast pocket, the little pixie, Yui, showed her face and clenched her hands over the rim of the pocket.

Her pretty face was distorted by grief, from her dark eyes tear after tear came dripping down. Watching the tear streaked pixie holding back her screams while her shoulders shook, Lyfa felt something hot ooze from her eyes.

'- If only the Undine forces were just a ruthless PK group!'

Then Lyfa could hate them. So she could swear that she would take revenge for the dying Tonkii.

But now they are just exercising their legitimate rights as players of an MMO. Killing monsters to earn money and experience was the first reason for playing, it originated in the table RPG games from many years ago, and hadn't changed over the years, eventually it evolved into FullDive type games. Neither the manners nor rules of ALfheim permitted Lyfa to speak against the Undines.

However, even if he was a monster, since he became a friend and a travelling companion, what kind of manners won't let you protect him? 'This child is a friend so don't kill him', if we couldn't say that, what was the meaning of the rules?

Lyfa believed that even in this world, there was «freedom of spirit». Lyfa believed it was possible to show feelings here that you would never expose in the real world. However, as players increased their status, donned rarer and more powerful equipment, their rank increased, but at the same time, their wings were bound by chains. At one time, even those

Undines were beginning players who didn't know right from left, when they saw non-active monsters in the field, some might have thought that they were cute and not want to kill them.

With attacks that sound continuous, Lyfa stood inconsolably. As the attacks got louder, Tonkii's cries, which were inversely proportional, become more and more feeble. Tonkii's HP had already sunk below 50%. There were two minutes— no, sixty seconds left.

"...Kirito-kun."

"Lyfa."

They spoke almost simultaneously.

Lyfa raised her eyes to met the Spriggan's black pupils and said:

"...I'm going to help."

"I'll go too."

'Your goal is Aarun so run away', Lyfa swallowed back her words and nodded her head. If the two of them interfere, they will be dead in ten seconds or less. There was no meaning behind their actions.

But, like with Kirito, Lyfa's beliefs won't let her sit on the sidelines and do nothing. They had saved Tonkii from the three-faced giant and Tonkii had saved them in return. Even if the evil-god is nothing more than a bunch of code buried in a corner of the server, they had became friends, and even given it a name, there was no way they could just stand there and watch him die, or else there was no point in playing VRMMOs.

"...You know, today I'll help you travel from Sylvain to Aarun again."

Lyfa said quickly, Kirito nodded and put a hand to his sword's hilt.

"Thank you. ...Yui, hide well."

"Yes... Papa, Lyfa-san... good luck!"

Yui hid deep in Kirito's pocket, the pixie's face now free of tears. Kirito and Lyfa drew their swords at the same time. At the sharp metallic sound, an Undine mage at the side turned with a questioning look.

We will go after the low defense mages first. Confirmed by eye contact, they both dashed forward at full speed. Snow scattered high as the air shook with the force of their passage.

Lyfa too moved at the limit of her speed bringing down her katana with both hands as she reached her target.

"Eyaa!!"

Down came the katana with fierce momentum. Like green lightning, the katana bit into the shoulder of the mage on the back left edge.

The light blue robe he wore was a considerably rare piece of equipment, and his HP was only reduced by about 30%. As he went to raise his staff, a black flash hit his body horizontally. A bit later, a loud booming attack sound effect was heard. His HP was reduced another 40% by one of Kirito's godspeed blows with his greatsword.

Not showing any mercy, Lyfa relentlessly continued to attack the player floating silently through the air. With each hit, the mage's HP decreased until with a final blow it became zero.

Then in a column of blue water the Mage's avatar disappeared. All that remained was a Remain Light, and brushing it off, Lyfa turned to the next enemy.

At this point, the other mages who were focused on attacking Tonkii with long range spells finally seem to notice that something was wrong. With a dumbfounded expression, one started yelling.

"...Are you serious?"

"Well, what do you... think!"

Shouting in response, Lyfa kicked snow.

They were indeed the Undine elite troops, their reaction speed was very fast. They stopped the long incantations, and switched to high-speed short range spells. However, Lyfa and Kirito`s speed was slightly higher. In position to use the second mage as a shield, they continued their sword crossing attacks. The Mages still released their spells, but the most that happened was that their clothes were grazed as the mages were using the type of magic that moved in straight lines.

Lyfa frowned as one or two homing-type spells, which were mixed in, scored direct hits. Killing her second mage, Lyfa turned to see Kirito already moving on to his next target. With a swing of his sword, Kirito broke the ground, sending snow flying in all directions.

Suddenly, there came a sound as a silver arrow sank into Kirito`s left shoulder.

Turning around to look at the scout leader, standing a fair distance away, who with a straight face readied a second arrow. Opening his mouth, he loudly ordered:

"Warrior team, fall back! The mage team is under attack!"

The second arrow shot toward Lyfa`s chest, silver trailing it like a meteor. Too fast to dodge, she blocked it with her left arm. Thunk! With the sound of impact, Lyfa's HP was reduced by more than ten percent. While she was staggering, a high pressure stream of water that was more like a laser pierced her right leg. Of course, Lyfa did not feel any pain, but her face contorted with the unpleasant numbness.

As Kirito fought his third opponent, who had already lost more than half of his HP, he was engulfed in an ice tornado. Lyfa got close, ready to use recovery magic, but found the mages gathered in preparation for a large-scale magic attack. Moreover, the warriors who had been attacking Tonkii came rushing over with the look of demons.

'- Is this as far as we go?'

Nearly fifty seconds had already passed since the battle began, and they have fought well considering the number of opponents. With this, Tonkii would no doubt forgive them.

Lyfa shut her eyes and laid her head on Kirito's chest, waiting for the moment that sword, arrow or magic would blow their HP away.

However, before the sound of attacks, the flute sound of a cry tens of thousands of times louder was heard. The intensely cold air shivered, the sound echoing off the distant snow covered mountains, it was definitely Tonkii's cry, but it was totally different from his earlier weak cries.

It couldn't be, had Tonkii finally died? Lyfa thought as she turned her pained face to the top of the hill.

That oval body was engraved with many scars, but one was especially long and deep. As she watched that crack extended until the ends connected.

"Oh..."

Lyfa whispered. She had expected to see the black blood of the evil-god gushing out of the crack on its body.

But—

Gushing out, was pure white, dazzling light.

The white light shot out accompanied by a high-pitched resonance that enveloped warriors, mages, and scouts, not sparing a single Undine. The aura of support magic surrounding their bodies became smoke and dissipated and the effects of attack magic evaporated.

...Dispel Field!

A special ability that only high-level boss monsters possessed. For a low-level evil-god's ability, it was way too strong. Not understanding what was happening, Lyfa, Kirito and the 22 Undines were frozen for an instant.

With all eyes gathered, the light that covered Tonkii's body silently dispersed. No, that's not it. Only its thick, hard husk blew off. The continuing light source stretched out like a spiral minaret.

The tip of the the spiral of light moved, and she understood.

That the source of light, the pure white strips, were eight glowing wings expanded radially, four on each side.

"...Tonkii..."

Seeming like it heard Lyfa, the unchanged elephant-like face lifted away from the wings. Its long nose held high and its fluttering ears spread wide—

Yurururuuu. The loud sound once again emanated from the evil-god who was no longer a jellyfish. With a flap of the eight wings, it soared skyward.

The once round body is now sleek and streamlined. Of the 20 tentacles that once hung down from its stomach, they were no longer clawed feelers, but more like the vines of a plant. Its HP, which had decreased to about 10% was recovered to full.

After reaching around ten meters in height, Tonkii hovered for a moment, when, without warning its color shifted until it was emitting a blue glow.

"Ah... That's bad..."

Kirito whispered that, then he suddenly twisted round to grab Lyfa and dragged her down to the snow.

Just after that, Tonkii released a truly massive thunderbolt from each of its legs, one after another.

Without even having time to scream, the Undines were struck and blown apart with the noise. Some mages and archers were blown to pieces in a single hit, but the warriors seemed to have endured.

"Retreat to the bottom of the hill! Close battle formation for healing and support!"

The scout commander, seeing no chance of recovery, shouted. Of the less than twenty people who survived, all ran down the slope together. The warriors built shield walls while the remaining mages started chanting behind them.

However, Tonkii slowly glided through the air catching up, this time filled with a pure white light.

Kuaa... echoes as rings of light rained down, disabling any magical powers. Also, any incomplete incantations turned into smoke and dissipated.

"Goddamn it!!"

The scout leader, shouted having finally lost his composure. He raised his hand toward the sky. Arrows of smoke burst out, creating a smokescreen, hiding all of the Undines.

"Retreat, retreat!!"

While that order was shouted, the Undine forces fled in a straight line, clearly visible from where Lyfa stood. Their escape was also very quick, and they soon disappeared over the ridge in the distance.

Of course, for the Tonkii who could now fly, catching up to players trying to escape on the ground would be easy. But it just issued a cry of victory, then flapped four wings on one side to change direction.

Then it flew slowly until it hovered just over the heads of Lyfa and Kirito. From the now mostly white elephant head, three pairs eyes shifted to look down at them.

"...So, what should we do now?"

Kirito said something that she had heard before.

Tonkii simply elongated its nose, answered him. Its nose stretched and wrapped around Lyfa and Kirito, lifting them without an explanation. 'That's what I thought!' While thinking that, they were dropped down on its back, landing on their behinds at the same time with a don sound.

They looked at each other and sheathed their swords. Lyfa began stroking its white fur. Maybe it was just her imagination, the fur now seemed to be longer and even more supple than before.

"...After all that, it's good that you are alive, Tonkii."

Lyfa said, then Yui stuck her head out of Kirito`s pocket, clapped her hands said:

"I'm really glad too! Alive means good things will happen!"

"That would be nice..."

Kirito said while looking up and down.

After this, Tonkii would probably go somewhere. Ahead, was the big hole in the center of Jötunheimr— If that was his destination, it would get more confusing. Fortunately, after a shout, he headed above, in the direction of the roots of the World Tree.

Every time it beat its wave-like wings, its hair wrapped close to its body, the great evil-god began to rise through the air. It flew upward in a spiral, until Lyfa was able to the see the entire region of Jötunheimr.

"Wow..."

Lyfa could not help but exclaim. She began to glance over the beautiful and deadly ice world.

In this area, flight was not possible, so to see the view from such a high altitude was something that only Lyfa and Kirito had ever seen. Lyfa subconsciously opened her menu window to bring out an item to take a picture, but she thought again and stopped herself. Perspective views can

be preserved through the screenshots, but the mood at this time could not be recorded. The sorrow and joy, melancholy and feeling of freedom were all mixed together to form a feeling of wonder.

Whether Tonkii knew how Lyfa was feeling or not, he slowed down his speed a bit and made a small turn, then once again strengthened the force of the wings.

Suddenly, from above an object entered her vision at close range. Lyfa couldn't immediately make it out.

The transparent ice blue inverted crystal cone. It was wrapped around by black mesh tube-like things, the roots of the World Tree.

According to the close distance effect, the length of the huge icicle is roughly two hundred meters or more. As they speculated on the ground, it was internally divided into several sections, forming an ice dungeon.

Without a sound, Lyfa opened her eyes wide, carefully inspecting it. Suddenly, at the icicle's bottom— inside the sharp point, a flash of golden light caught her attention.

No matter how much she concentrated, she couldn't make it out. Lyfa unconsciously raised her right hand, incanting a short spell.

Water started gushing out of her hands, immediately freezing to form a flat crystal. Kirito quickly turned to face her and asked:

"What is it?"

"A type of distance viewing magic made with an ice crystal. Here, look at the tip of that huge icicle, you can see something shining..."

After hearing this, Kirito took a closer look through the lens. The shaking golden light slowly steadied, finally leaving a clear image.

"Oh WOW!"

Once she saw the true nature of the light, Lyfa gave a squeal like a little girl.

Sealed in the tip of the icicle, stood a fearful yet beautiful transparent golden blade. Judging by the phosphorescence that wrapped around the blade and its minute decoration, it was clear that it was a legendary sword. No, even before that, Lyfa already knew the name of the sword.

"That is the «Holy Sword Excaliber». I've seen a picture of it on the official ALO website... It is the only sword that surpasses General Eugene's «Demonic Sword Gram», the one and only strongest sword... As far as I know, no one has ever been able to discover its location."

"S, Strongest..."

With Lyfa explaining with a voice so full of wonder. Kirito swallowed his saliva and gulped nervously.

The sealed sword was located at the bottom of a spiral staircase, which appeared to be connected to the icicle dungeon. That is to say, only someone who fought through the entire dungeon could obtain the ultimate sword.

The evil-god, Tonkii, carrying the two fairies, circled the icicle and rose in a spiral. Peeling her eyes away from the holy sword, Lyfa looked up and discovered two things.

The first thing Lyfa saw was a platform-shaped balcony protruding from the middle of the icicle. Tonkii's flight path would pass near it. It was very possible to jump off Tonkii onto that balcony.

Second, at the top of the ice-covered Jötunheimr was a hanging root with carved stairs. The stairs kept going up and continue past the ceiling. It was definitely an escape route that would lead to the aboveground area of Alfheim.

There was no connection between the stairs leading aboveground and the balcony leading to the dungeon. If you jumped to the balcony for a chance at the holy sword, then there wouldn't be a way to get to the stairs.

Kirito seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion. His eyes kept darting back and forth between the balcony and the escape stairs. While doing that, they approached the balcony. After twenty... no... if they don't make a decision in ten seconds...

In silence, Tonkii arrived at the balcony, he flew horizontally as if to give them the chance. For VRMMO players like Kirito and Lyfa, their first instinct was to jump down, and their bodies shook.

—But of course, they did not jump off.

They looked at each other, wearing slightly embarrassed smiles, then Lyfa spoke.

"...We must come here again, but with lots of comrades."

"You are right. This dungeon is perhaps the most difficult place in all of Jötunheimr. With just by the two of us, there is no way we can breakthrough."

"Ah, you, have way too much regret!"

While the two laughed, Tonkii went past the balcony without confusion and continued to rise. Looking down past the square entry of the dungeon, there was a shadow of a terrible evil-god. It resembled the three-faced giant that had attacked Tonkii, but it appeared to be a much stronger humanoid type.

Perhaps the strongest monster in the deepest dungeon of Jötunheimr is from the same species. The evil-god seems to be a type that Tonkii's species viewed with hostility, maybe that's why they were responsible for transporting players here. That was also why the giant was trying to kill Tonkii before it evolved.

If they joined an evil-god hunting party and mechanically fought, they would never think of only killing the giant-type monsters, and saving the elephant jellyfish type. If just the two of them didn't fall down here, this event, no, this friendship wouldn't have happened.

While she was speculating, Tonkii approached the canopy. The root with the carved staircase was clearly visible, hanging down from the corner of the icicle.

With a Yururu, Tonkii spread its wings and slowed down. Hovering, it extended its nose, winding it around the tree root near the stairs like a rope, and stopped.

Seeing the wooden stairs shake, Lyfa stood up.

Naturally taking Kirito's hand in her own, they moved to the bottom step.

With a little shake, Tonkii confirmed the loss of its burden and uncoiled his nose from the root. It turned around high above getting ready to dive.

As it turned, Lyfa grabbed the tip of the huge receding nose in one hand.

"...I'll come again, Tonkii. Take care until then. Don`t let the other evil-gods bully you."

When done whispering, Lyfa let go. Kirito grabbed the trunk and Yui even flew out of his breast pocket, grasping a bunch of the fur which hung off its nose with both small hands.

"We will talk a lot again, Tonkii-san."

The pixie smiled as she spoke. The evil-god answered with a Furururu and turned, folding its wings.

It descended at a tremendous speed, shrinking in moments.

Wings shining one last time, the mysterious evil-god faded into the darkness of Jötunheimr. Surely, now it will be able to live free from torment, flying freely through the sky. And, if we ever had the chance to return to this place and call out to him, he would surely give us a ride on his back again.

Lyfa wiped the tears that had begun to trickle out of the corner of her eyes, and meeting Kirito's eyes, started to laugh.

"Let`s go! I am pretty sure that Aarun is above!"

After listening to the vibrant words, Kirito stretched and replied:

"Well, lets finish the last leg of this journey... Lyfa, when we get to the top, let's keep what we know about the holy sword secret."

"Oh you, saying something to ruin this important moment..."

The black clad Spriggan shrugged his shoulders, while still holding hands, started running up the spiral stairs through the root.

The trip that took less than three minutes when falling through the gigantic earthworm, was much more time consuming when journeying on foot. As they walked up a path dimly lit by glowing mushrooms, she soon gave up counting the steps. After more than ten minutes, a thin streak of bright light appeared ahead.

Kirito and Lyfa looked at each other, and with a final spurt rushed to the exit. Taking two steps at a time, they stuck their heads out of a hole in the wall of the tree.

Jumping out of the stairway, they found themselves on a moss-covered stone terrace. They did a full turn from the momentum, then sat down on the stone pavement.

After opening their eyes which were closed the second they emerged, they took in the sight in front of them—

It was the night view of a beautiful, majestic city.

As if the remains of an ancient civilization, stone buildings of various sizes spread out in all directions. Yellow fires, blue magic lights, and pink mineral lights twinkled everywhere as though stardust had been sprinkled over the city. There was no unity of race among the silhouettes of the players moving around under this light, but an equal number of each of the nine fairy races.

After taking in the city at night, Lyfa lifted her face.

Upon the dark blue of the night sky, a shadow in the form of a tree split the night.

"...The World Tree..."

Lyfa whispered, she looked at Kirito beside her and continued:

"...No doubt, this is «Aarun». The center of ALfheim. This world's largest city."

"Yes. ...We are finally here."

Kirito nodded his head, Yui stuck her face out of his pocket, revealing a brilliant smile.

"Wow! This is the first time I am in a city with so many people!"

It was the same for Lyfa. The many people who left their home territory and enjoyed adventures freely, she had never thought of it before.

The two of them just sat on the edge of the terrace, enjoying the ambiance of the bustling city.

Soon, the heavy sound of a pipe organ sounded, breaking Lyfa out of her introspection. That was followed by a female voice floating down from the heavens. 'This is a notice of the regular weekly maintenance, which occurs at 4 am, the server will be closed', a system announcement. Lyfa had

never stayed logged on so long before, so this was the first time she had heard it.

Truly, a lot of 'first times' happened since yesterday. While thinking that, Lyfa moved her legs forward, and stood up.

"We should stop here today. Let's find an inn and logout."

Kirito stood up, and nodding once, the Spriggan asked:

"When does the maintenance end?"

"It lasts until noon today."

"I see..."

After looking down lightly, Kirito suddenly stared at the sky.

The branches of the world tree opened, springing in every direction.

Kirito's black eyes narrowed slightly, his mouth seemed to move, seeing that, Lyfa remembered his reason for coming to ALfheim.

He wants to meet «someone» at the top of the World Tree.

I wonder who that is. If it's not a quest NPC, it might be a staff member on the operating side, or...

Before she can think any further, Kirito had resumed his earlier expression and said:

"Let's find an inn. I am poor now, someplace not too luxurious would be nice."

"...Acting cool, you gave all of your money to the two lords? At least keep some living expenses!"

Lyfa laughed at his predicament, then said to Yui in his breast pocket.

"That's what your papa said. Is there a cheap inn nearby?"

Strangely, the Navigation Pixie had crinkled her eyebrows in a frown, looking at the world tree, she soon smiled and answered.

"Yes, down there seems to be a place that is super cheap!"

"S, super cheap..."

Not caring about Lyfa's hesitation, Kirito began to walk briskly, so she followed.

Though she should be feeling sleepy from staying up too late, she felt a bit uneasy and looked at the world tree once again.

Of course, with the foliage lost in the night sky, there was nothing to see.

Chapter 6

Asuna/Yuuki Asuna's imprisonment had a double meaning ever since January, 2025.

The first kind of imprisonment was being confined in a golden cage. Although this human-sized cage was luxurious and beautiful, it could not be destroyed, no matter what method was used.

The reason was because the one-centimeter thick bars were not metal, but virtual 3D objects composed of digital code. The cage had been designated as «indestructible» by the system, so even if the bars were pounded with a sledgehammer, not a single scratch would be found.

The second imprisonment was that of Asuna's consciousness, which was trapped in a dive in the virtual world itself.

The name of this world was «ALfheim Online», referred to as ALO. It was a large scale network RPG administered by «RECTO Progress»— a type of game known as a VRMMO.

ALO itself was operating as a net game without anyone knowing the difference; tens of thousands of regular players pay a connection fee and enjoyed the game. However underneath the game, because of a man's evil intentions, it was engaged in a massive illegal and inhuman project.

The core operating systems of ALO were actually a copy of «Sword Art Online» which shook and shocked Japan for two years from 2022 to 2024.

Development of SAO was controlled by «Argus», which had let ten thousand people, regardless of age or sex, become captives in a virtual world, with a death count of nearly 40%. In the aftermath of that terrible incident, they went bankrupt. «RECTO», a major electronics manufacturer's FullDive Research Division was commissioned to perform maintenance on the SAO server. The man in question had an important position and used a copy of the original SAO data to successfully create ALO. After the death game was cleared, the minds of all remaining players should have been liberated but he, using «Consciousness Abduction», imprisoned the awareness of three hundred players in the ALO server.

The man's purpose was to use these three hundred players' brains as experimental materials, utilizing the FullDive system to study human emotion and memory manipulation.

The man also imprisoned Asuna's consciousness inside the world of ALO. Her avatar was shut in a bird cage hanging on a branch of the «World Tree» in the center of ALfheim, at a height that no player could ever reach. The man's motive was to ensure Asuna's slumber, and to become her husband in the real world and therefore become the successor to the CEO of RECTO, Asuna's father, Yuuki Shouzou. Now, two months after the resolution of the SAO incident, he was close to achieving his goals.

That man's name is Sugou Nobuyuki. His other name is the ruler of Alfheim, «Fairy King Oberon».

Using the hard won passcode, Asuna opened the cage and stepped onto the path leading from the golden birdcage. She glanced at the sun which was setting over the horizon while she slowly crept forward.

Engraved with the ring pattern of a tree, the branches of the «World Tree» formed a long and wide path. Smaller branches that acted as railings gave it an organic feel. In addition to the branches, there were also little birds and small animals which occasionally showed themselves, adding to the illusion that this was «inside of the game».

Fearing that monsters would appear, Asuna cautiously moved forward. After a few minutes of walking, a huge wall, the main trunk of the World Tree, came into view on the other side of a curtain of leaves. A black, gaping hole appeared where branch and trunk met, leading into the interior of the World Tree. Unconsiously dampening her footsteps, Asuna warily approached the hole.

When she arrived in front of the oval hole which mimicked a natural tree knot, she saw an unmistakably artificial rectangular door. The only difference was that this door had no handle but beside it was a touch panel. Praying with all her heart that it wasn't locked, Asuna touched it with her fingertips.

Soundlessly, the door slid open to the right. After checking for signs of life, she hurried in.

The pathway she found inside was off-white and led straight into the depths of the tree. Dim light reflected off of the inorganic walls from orange lights periodically set in the ceiling. Unlike the corridors of trees that showed a stunning beauty outside, here it seemed like nobody had taken the trouble to place objects, leaving it completely undecorated.

It was as if someone had suddenly switched the game world with an office or library. From the white floors, cold air flowed over her bare feet, sending a chill through her entire body. It was as though she was being forced to realize she was infiltrating enemy headquarters. Asuna bit her lips and continued.

Unlike Kayaba Akihiko, Sugou Nobuyuki had a different sort of insanity.

Sugou, who was an employee of RECTO, used his position to orchestrate the imprisonment of 300 players from SAO and started dangerous human experiments with their brains. He was not just crazy but almost greed personified. No matter how much he already had, his bottomless hunger made him move to get more. Asuna who grew up near him understood this point about him better than anyone.

Right now Sugou had control over a portion of Asuna and found it very pleasurable to know he would have it all before long. If he knew that Asuna had escaped from the cage, his rage would have no limits. He would visit every possible humiliation upon her before using her as a subject in his experiments. Just thinking about that made Asuna's knees start to wobble.

But if she turned back now, if she returned to the cage, she would have surrendered to Sugou. If it was Kirito he would never give up, even if he didn't have a sword.

Asuna straightened her back, and looked at the passage. Somehow, she managed to take a step with feet that seemed to be made of lead. Once she took that first step, she didn't stop again.

The passage seemed to be endless. The wall panels at top, bottom, left, or right had no seams or marks. It became increasingly difficult to tell if she was moving at all. Following the occasional orange light from the ceiling, Asuna single-mindedly continued forward. When she finally saw another door in front, she involuntarily sighed in relief.

This door was identical to the door from before. Again, she carefully touched the panel with her fingertips. The door slid open soundlessly.

Behind it was the same passage, this time it continued left and right. Feeling depressed, Asuna walked past the door. The surprising thing was, after a few seconds the door automatically closed, but it had melted into the wall, blending seamlessly. Asuna frantically touched the door here and there, but it didn't re-open.

Asuna's shoulders slumped and she decided to forget about the door. She had no plans to go back anyway. She lifted her head and looked to her right and left.

What had been a straight path now seemed to curve in a gentle arc. Thinking for a second, she started walking to the right. With faint footsteps, she earnestly continued forward. She started doubting herself. Have I been walking in circles all this time? While Asuna was thinking that— something other than a wall finally appeared.

On the inside light-grey wall of the curve, there was something like a poster. After rushing over to it, it turned out to be a guide map. Asuna stared at the map, trying to imprint it in her memory.

At the top of the rectangular map «Complete Laboratory Map: Floor C» was written in a nondescript font. Under that was a simple illustration. There were three circular floors, and she was currently in an outer passage of the top one.

There was only the round passage on this floor. The straight passage that led to the bird cage was not displayed. However, on the lower floors, A and B there were various rooms labeled on the inner area, like «Data Reading Room», «Main Monitor Room», «Sleep Room» and others.

Movement between floors seemed to be performed by an elevator shown at the top of this floor's circular passage. One vertical line connected all three floors and continued a long way to connect to something down below.

Following the elevator line, at the bottom is a large rectangular room. A chill ran down her back when she read the label next to that room: «Experimental Body Storage Facility».

"Experimental Body..."

Those words left a bitter aftertaste in Asuna's mouth.

It seemed certain that this was Sugou's illegal research facility. Indeed, if all of the testing was done in the virtual world, then it would have been easy to hide. If it looked like they would be exposed, with a touch of a fingertip, all evidence would disappear, leaving not a single piece of paper.

If the purpose of the circular facilities and that room were considered, one phrase would give it away, «Experimental Body». This is where Sugou was

keeping the players he had abducted from SAO. Their consciousness was kept locked up in the storage facility shown on the guide.

Asuna thought about it for a moment then turned and continued walking down the curved passage. After walking for a few minutes at a brisk pace, a slide door with no decoration appeared on the left hand side of the passage. Next to the door a small inverted triangle stuck out from the wall.

Asuna took a deep breath and pushed the button with her finger. The door slid open immediately, opening into a small rectangular room. Asuna went inside, turned around and saw a control panel, very similar to those in reality.

After a moment of hesitation, Asuna picked and pushed the bottom button of the four lined up. The door closed and surprisingly her body was wrapped in a sense of falling. The box that Asuna rode descended silently down the inside of the virtual tree, stopping with a virtual sense of slowdown after a few seconds. A vertical slit appeared, where moments before was a solid white door, and the door opened with the sides sliding to the left and right.

Asuna stepped out of the door with light footsteps.

What appeared before her eyes was the same bland passage as on the floor above, going in a straight line. After making sure that there were no signs of life, Asuna started walking.

Oberon had given Asuna only a thin, simple, one piece dress that she didn't approve of, but being barefoot in this situation was not a bad thing. If she had been wearing shoes, sound effects would have inevitably occurred. When in SAO, to make sure that monsters did not notice her so she could do a back attack or ambush, she often went barefoot, accepting the drop in defense.

Other than actual combat, with Aincrad's ruins region as a stage, Kirito, Klein, Lisbeth and Asuna played a «Surprise Attack Game» many times. For Asuna who usually had light equipment that didn't make any noise, she was constantly in the top ranks. But whenever she tried to back attack Kirito, it never worked, not even once. So once she tried to sneak up on him without shoes on and just as she was about to hit him on the head with a wooden sword, he took notice and dodged. After he avoided her attack, Kirito had grabbed her leg and started tickling her non-stop. She started laughing so hard that she thought she would die.

Instead of the now uncertain real world, she wished she could have gone back to that time— That idea could not help but start to form in her mind with tears forming in her eyes. Asuna shook her head to brush aside the sad feeling.

Kirito was waiting for her in the real world. The only place she wanted to be was in Kirito's arms. For that reason all she can do was move forward.

The passage wasn't that long. While walking, a plain door came into view.

If it was locked, she would have to return to the previous floor to look for the control system. While thinking that, she arrived in front of the door. Contrary to her thoughts the door silently opened to the left and right. Inside there was a strong light. She instinctively squinted her eyes.

"...?!"

As soon as she looked into the room, Asuna gasped.

It was an incredibly vast space.

You could even say the pure white room was about the same size as a huge event hall. The distance could not be felt due to how large it was and there was a lack of detail. The ceiling shone with a white light, same as the white floor— which had many neatly arranged short pillar-like things.

Making sure that nothing in sight was moving, Asuna stepped into the room and carefully moved forward.

From Asuna's view, those pillar-like objects were arranged in rows of 18 pillars. If that space was square, there would be approximately 300 of them. Fighting back her fear, Asuna moved toward one of them.

Reaching up to Asuna's chest, they were wide enough around that it would probably take both arms to reach around them. The surface of it was smooth, though there were gaps in which something floated. That, however you looked at it— was a human brain.

Although it was the correct size, the color wasn't real. It is made of a semi-transparent blue-violet material. The object was incredibly detailed and instead of a holographic display, it looked like sapphire sculpture.

Looking closely, she noticed that lights periodically appeared and scattered throughout the model, as they disappear there was a pow of colorful firework spread. It looked like a bundle of ultra-compact fireworks.

Frowning, Asuna observed from the side, she noticed that the light moving at a part of the network suddenly became stronger. The ending spark that used to be yellow became red and flashed brighter, then the sequence repeated. At the bottom of the brain-like object was a transparent chart that recorded the peak activity. Watching the log for the next minute, various numbers and symbols were displayed, along with words like pain and terror.

...It's suffering.

Asuna realized intuitively.

The brain was being tormented, by incredible pain, sorrow and fear. The sparks were like screams coming from the brain. In front of Asuna's eyes surfaced the face belonging to the owner of the brain. That face was distorted to the limit, mouth open in scream after soundless scream.

Unable to bear her imagination, Asuna backed up a few steps. In her head she saw the map above, «Experimental Body Storage Facility», and heard Oberon's words «Techniques to Manipulate Emotions» in a flashback. The scene before her finally put the pieces of the puzzle together, and a certain picture appeared.

That meant the hundreds of brains here were not computer-generated virtual objects, but real-time monitoring of former SAO players. When the game was completed, these people should have been freed, instead they were locked up by Sugou to be used in his devil's research into thought, emotion and memory.

"This... this is too horrible..."

Asuna covered her mouth with both hands while whispering deep in her throat.

The research being done, along with human cloning experiments was absolutely taboo, something humans should never touch. It was not just absolutely criminal. It was like trampling on a person's thought and soul, the last dignity of that person was being destroyed.

Asuna turned painfully to the right. Two meters away there was the same container, above it also floated a transparent blue brain. It had the exact same attention to detail, but the lights flickering in «somebody»'s brain were much slower. The color running through it was a yellow shading to red, and it looked almost like a cloudy liquid.

On the other side... and beyond that, were a seemingly infinite number of brains, all dyed in different colors, and all probably crying in despair.

Suppressing her panic, Asuna wiped away tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

It was not allowed. No, I would never forgive him. She and Kirito had bet their lives in battle, and the results were being used by Sugou for his experiments, that point could never be forgiven. His evil deeds would be exposed, there was no punishment good enough for that man.

"Wait for me... I will save you soon..."

After saying that, Asuna gently touched the container holding the tortured brain. Then she lifted her head, and walking between the pillars, headed toward the back of the room.

After walking past ten columns, she suddenly heard a human voice. Asuna quickly flattened herself behind the nearest container. Carefully glancing around, she searched for the source of the voice. The voice seemed to be coming from far to her right. Almost crawling, she advanced in the direction of the sound.

After reaching the back of one of the columns, she saw something strange ahead.

"...!?"

Panicking, she pulled back in a hurry. After blinking a few times, she fearfully looked once again.

The now gone 61st floor of Aincrad, was also known as «Insect Land». As its name suggested, it was a floor full of bug monsters. For the majority of women, including Asuna, that place was the equivalent to hell. One of the worst was a giant slug monster called «Blue Slug». With slimy grey skin and black spots, they had three pairs of large and small eyestalks, and tentacles protruding from their mouth for attack, they were truly a nightmare -.

Now, a few meters away from Asuna, there were two creatures with their backs turned to her who were deep in conversation. Those creatures were infinitely close to the Blue Slugs.

Those huge slug-like monsters seemed to be exchanging ideas while watching a single brain. The slug on the right shook its eyes and spoke in a squeaky voice.

"Oh, this guy is dreaming about Spica-chan again. B13 and B14 fields are off the charts. B16 is high too... he is really excited."

The slug to the left answered while using a tentacle to poke at the holo-window near the brain.

"Isn't it a coincidence? This is still the third experiment, right?"

"Well, this formation is the result of an induced-emotion circuit. I inserted the Spica-chan image into his memory, this display exceeds the threshold frequency."

"Ok, we will continue monitoring the sample..."

Disgusted at the two slugs' annoying high-pitched voices, she withdrew behind the pillar again.

They are Sugou's subordinates, engaged in this inhuman experiment though it is uncertain why they have that appearance. From their words, she could feel they had no moral hesitation.

Asuna clenched her right hand tightly. If she had a sword in her hand right then... she would definitely give them the death appropriate to their appearance.

Quelling the impulse to do what her anger demanded, Asuna slowly backed away and after getting a certain distance from the slugs, continued toward the depths of the room.

Carefully moving ahead at full speed she continued to walk past columns of cylinders and finally arrived at the deepest parts of the room. At the end of the room— in front of the white walls, Asuna found a floating black cube.

This made Asuna think of the time when she was at Aincard's underground maze's control system. If she could access it with administrator privileges, it would be possible to log out of this crazy world.

But from that point on, there was not a single place to hide. Asuna took a deep breath, and jumped out from behind the cylinder with grim determination.

Running toward the console as silently as possible. The ten meters seemed to be incredibly far away.

Every step she took, she tasted the feeling of fear that someone might shout to stop her coming from behind, but she continued moving her legs, and at last, she arrived at the console. At that point she turned around, and looked beyond the cylinders. With their antenne shaking, the slugs still seemed to be in the middle of an argument.

Asuna turned again to the black console. The slant cut top was dark and silent, on the right side there was a thin slit which remained plugged with a silver key card. Praying to herself, Asuna reached out, and grasping the card, slid it down.

A Poon sound effect rang out and Asuna ducked her head. To the left of the card slot, a light blue window and holo-keyboard appeared.

There were many, close packed menus in the window. Asuna crushed her inner anxiety, and carefully read the small English font.

At the bottom left was the button labeled [Transport], Asuna used trembling fingers to push this button. With Bun sound, a new window appeared. On it there was a map that displayed the entire laboratory. It seemed that it was possible to jump directly to anywhere in the laboratory using that system.

But she had no use for that now. Desperately searching, Asuna found a small button shinning on the right hand side labeled [Exit Virtual Lab].

"This is it...!"

With a small cry, Asuna touched it. Above it another window appeared. On the rectangular window there appear the words [Execute log-off sequence?] followed by 'OK' and 'CANCEL' buttons.

God—

With her heart desperately praying, she moved her right hand to push the button—

Suddenly, from behind her came a gray tentacle which grabbed her right hand.

"...!!"

Asuna endured, throttling down a scream, as she tried to force her finger closer to the button, but the tentacle held onto her like steel wire and and didn't even budge. She tried to use her left hand, but just as she started to move it, a new tentacle twined around her arm. Asuna's hands were pulled into the air, the rest of her body following.

Asuna's captors slowly turn her body around. As expected, it was same two slugs from earlier.

Their 4 tennis ball sized eyes set with orange irises, moved to and fro on their stalks. The expressionless eyes turned to inspect Asuna's body and face, then the left slug's circular mouth moved oddly, a rasping voice coming out.

"—Who are you? What are you doing in this place?"

Asuna fought back her fear, and pretending nothing was wrong replied in a casual voice.

"Put me down now! I am a friend of Sugou. I came here to observe and now I'm leaving."

"Oh? I haven't heard anything about that?"

The slug on the right, turned two of its eyes as if it was tilting its head.

"You heard anything?"

"Not at all. 'sides, ain't it bad if outsiders see these?"

"Oh... wait..."

One of its eyestalks lengthened, the round eye getting a closer look at Asuna's face.

"...It's you right. You're the person Sugou-chan locked up at the top of the World Tree..."

"Yes. I heard about that. How selfish, the boss keeping such a cute girl to himself."

"Arg..."

Asuna looked over her shoulder at the console and extended her left leg to try to push the button. However, from the mouth of the slug came another tentacle that entangled her foot. Asuna struggled to reach the console, but her efforts amounted to nothing.

Because of going over the time limit, it returned to the initial screen.

"Hey, hey, don't try to act violent."

The slug extended more tentacles, and wrapped up her entire body. Enfolded mercilessly, the wire-like tentacles cut into the flesh of her stomach and thighs.

"Ouch...! Stop... Let go of me, you monster!"

"Oh, how cruel. Especially when I'm still experimenting with bathyesthesia[4] mapping."

"That's right. Manipulating this body like this needed a lot of training."

Being warped in silk like sharp pain that only exist in the illusional world, Asuna frowned and she desperately said:

"You two are scientists right...!? Participating in this... illegal, inhumane research, do you not feel ashamed!?"

"Ah, I feel this is much more humane than when we experimented with an animal's exposed brain by using electrodes. These guys are really just dreaming."

"Yes, yes. Sometimes we even let them have good feeling dreams. They should be thanking us!"

"...You are crazy..."

Asuna whispered, her body wrapped in a freezing chill. Those people, their true forms were those unfeeling slugs.

Paying no attention to Asuna, the two slugs start consulting each other.

"The boss is on a business trip, right? You go back to the real world and ask for instructions."

"Che, guess I have no choice. Yana, don't enjoy yourself while I'm gone."

"I know, I know. Hurry and go."

The slug removed some of the tentacles from Asuna's body and dexterously operated the console with one tentacle. After pushing the buttons a few times, that huge body of his disappeared without a sound.

"...!!"

After seeing that, Asuna was driven by scorching frustration, she shook her tied up body recklessly. Right there in front of her— was the exit to the real world she had dreamed of. The exit opened a little, and the bright light from the outside lit up the floor.

"Let me go!! Let me go!! Let me go back home!!"

Asuna cried almost crazily, but the tentacles showed no signs of loosening.

"I can't do that, the boss will kill me. More importantly, aren't you bored in this place with nothing? How about we play with some electronic drugs? I was getting tired of those dolls anyway."

As he said those words, the cold, damp tentacles stroked Asuna's face.

"S...Stop!! What do you...!?"

Asuna desperately resisted, but the slug immediately extended new tentacles. Touching the skin of Asuna's leg, the tentacles slowly reached up into her dress.

Asuna endured this unpleasant feeling, and pretended to lose all the strength in her body, and the ability to resist. The slug, taking advantage of that, moved a tentacle toward her mouth. Just as it was about to touch her lips—

Asuna raised her head and bit down -hard- on the tentacle.

"Ayhaa!! Ouchhhh!!"

Asuna ignored the screams of the slug and continued to bite down without mercy.

"S-Stop, ouch, I understand, I understand!!"

After confirming that the tentacles were removed from her clothes, Asuna opened her mouth. The slug hurriedly retracted the injured tentacle.

"Ouch, I forgot to cut off the pain absorption..."

The slug withdrew an eye stalk and complained, then a pillar of light appeared beside him. The other slug appeared with some sound effects.

"...? What are you doing?"

"Nothing. What did the boss say?"

"He was crazy furious, he wants us to immediately put her back in the birdcage above the laboratory, change the door's passcode, and monitor her 24 hours of the day."

"Che, when I had finally found something to play with..."

Extreme depression caused her sight to dim. A golden opportunity had slipped through her fingers.

"At least we could walk her back instead of using the teleport function. I would still like to feel her a little more."

"You like it too."

The slug once again wrapped its tentacles around Asuna's body, using its legless body to move toward the entrance of the room. At that moment, when the two slugs were not looking, Asuna quickly stretched out her right leg, and with her toes, pulled out the key card that was still in the slot of the console.

The screen disappeared, but the slugs didn't seem to notice it. Bending her body like a shrimp, she moved the card from her toes to her hand.

"Come on now, you mustn't act violently."

The slug once again lifted up Asuna's body and aimed for the exit.

With a clank, the latticed door to the birdcage closed. The slug used its tentacles to manipulate the number lock then waved it at Asuna.

"So long. If you have the chance, come and play again."

"I never want to see your face again."

After saying that bluntly, Asuna walked to the other side of the cage. The two slugs kept staring at her, but they finally turned around and crawled over the branches.

After a while, the world was wrapped in the darkness of night. Asuna stared at the blinking lights of the city far below, she whispered to herself:

"I won't lose, Kirito-kun. I will never give up. I'll definitely get out of here."

She turned to look at the silver keycard in her hand. It was useless without a console, but now it was her only hope.

Asuna walked over to the bed, and pretending to lie down, hid the keycard under her pillow.

As she closed her eyes, fatigue fell over her and slowly wrapped her in a veil of sleep.

Chapter 7

Out in the garden, a thin layer of snow still covered the ground, and the cold air wrapped around my body. Even so, the residual drowsiness would not leave my mind.

I shook my head a few times and then headed to the washstand in the corner of the garden. I twisted the antique silver faucet and placed my hands in the cascading water.

I threw some ice-cold water onto my face, and my facial nerves immediately winced with a numbing pain, and I marveled that the water hadn't frozen. Ignoring the pain, I splashed water on my face two or three more times, then took a sip of water directly from the tap.

As I wiped my face with the towel hanging around my neck, the sliding glass door into the porch opened and Suguha came down the stairs wearing her jersey. Usually, she was very energetic in the morning, but today was a rare day, she was only half-awake with her head wobbling.

"Good morning, Sugu."

Hearing the sound of my voice, Suguha unsteadily walked in front of me, blinked, and said:

"Good morning, onii-chan."

"You seem awfully sleepy. When did you go to bed yesterday?"

"Well, about four o'clock."

More than a little surprised, I shook my head.

"This is not good at all, a child shouldn't stay up so late. What were you doing?"

"Well... I was on the net..."

The answer surprised me a little. If it was the old Suguha, I could not imagine her staying up on the net so late. This girl... she has grown up quite well in the past two years that I wasn't here, I thought with a pang of emotion.

"As long as it is in moderation— Not that I'm someone with the right to say that..."

My voice sounded vague as I said the last part, and suddenly I remembered something that happened last night, and so I said:

"Hey Sugu, turn around."

"....?"

Still only half-awake and tilting her head at my request, Suguha turned half way around. I put my right hand under the faucet and thoroughly wet my hand, then I pulled down the neck of her jersey and let at least half a dozen drops of cryogenic temperature water drip down her back.

"Piaaaaaa——!!"

Suguha jumped and let loose a scream that echoed grandly.

Suguha kept pouting during stretching and exercising, but I promised to take her to a nearby family restaurant to eat an expensive raspberry cream parfait, and she easily recovered her good humor.

Today, since we had both overslept, by the time we had finished training and took turns showering, it was already nine o'clock. Our mother was, as usual, still sleeping deeply in her bedroom, so Suguha and I made breakfast together.

As I washed some tomatoes and cut them into six equal parts, she chopped up a head of lettuce, Suguha then looked at me and asked:

"Onii-chan, what are you planning to do today?"

"Well, I have a promise to keep a little after noon, but I think I'll go visit the hospital this morning."

"I see..."

Since I became aware of Asuna's situation, visiting the hospital every other day had become my most important habit.

In the real world, I'm only 16 years old, and there was little I could do for Asuna. No, one could say I couldn't do anything at all. All I could do was hold her hand and continue to pray.

The photos I received from Agil surfaced in my mind.

After finding a clue, I stepped into the imaginary world of ALfheim and after two days, finally arrived near the location in the photo, even if there was no

evidence that it was Asuna. I might just be looking in the totally wrong direction.

But in that world I will find something— that I'm positive.

Sugou wished for Asuna to sleep forever, and ALfheim Online is administered by the company under that guy's control. The character data of «Kirito» existing in that world, and the presence of the SAO mental care AI, «Yui»... I did not yet understand what kind of puzzle those pieces would build.

I intended to breakthrough the final challenge of that fairy land and climb the «World Tree» today, as soon as the ALO server maintenance was complete. Every time I thought about it, my back trembled in anticipation. It didn't seem like I would be able to quietly endure waiting for the maintenance to end just sitting in my room, asking myself if I was following the correct path or not.

That's why, before that I would like to see the real Asuna again and feel her warmth. Sugou may have told me to not go back and see her, but he basically can't do anything about me visiting anyway.

With the cut tomatoes, lettuce and watercress mixed in a bowl, I sprinkled it with dressing and stirred. Beside me, Suguha, who had been silent for a while, looked up and opened her mouth to ask:

"Say, onii-chan. Can I go with you to the hospital...?"

"Oh..?"

I was a little bewildered. Thus far Suguha had never bothered to learn about anything regarding SAO. I had told her about who Asuna is before, but other than that I hadn't told her my character name or anything else.

Last night, overwhelmed after learning of Asuna's marriage to Sugou, I had burst into tears in front of Suguha. Although I still felt a little awkward, I nodded with a calm expression.

"Oh.. sure. Asuna would be very happy about that."

After hearing this, Suguha smiled and nodded. I don't know why, but it seemed that her smiling face also contained a hint of sadness as I looked into her eyes. But Suguha turned around, took the bowl and walked to the kitchen table.

After that she did not show any strange looks, and I soon forgot about that awkward smile.

"Onii-chan, what are you going to do about school?"

Suguha inquired while sitting on the opposite side of the table from me, noisily chewing the crisp, raw vegetables.

That was a reasonable question. I was fourteen and in the autumn of my second-year of junior high school when I was trapped inside SAO. Escaping after two years, I was now sixteen years old. I should have been a second-year high school student as of April this year, but I didn't take the entrance exams. Even if I took the exams now, the majority of my memory had been devoted to the enormous amount of SAO-related data. To forget the price of items and the attack patterns of monsters, then memorize History and English would take a long time.

On this point, a man in a suit and tie with glasses from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications came and spoke to me. My mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of Asuna, and did not pay much attention, but despite that I somehow recalled what he said.

"There seems to be... plans to take a school building that had been abandoned due to unification and reorganization, then transform it into a temporary school, specializing in teaching the middle and high school students that returned from SAO. Everyone is accepted without an entrance examination and will be eligible to take the entrance examinations for university when we graduate."

"Oh, I see. That is good to hear... I guess ..."

Suguha smiled, but then she frowned, and in a low voice said:

"...It feels like that is, too much wholesale support..."

"Oh, your intuition is good."

I grinned at the words of my younger sister.

"I think the government's goal is just that. After all we have spent the past two years in a brutal game of death. The bureaucrats are probably worried about how our mental health has been affected. So they are throwing us all together, that way they can manage us all in one place, giving them some peace of mind."

"How could...."

Suguha's face distorted in irritation, so I hastily added:

"However, despite the management, I have to thank them for the safety net. Even if I want to take the entrance examination for a normal high school, I'd have to cram for a year. Of course, it is not compulsory for us to go to this temporary school, we can select to study for exams ourselves if we want to."

"You could do just that, Onii-chan's marks are good."

"That should be past tense, I haven't studied for two years."

"Then I'll tutor you!"

"Oh, then can I ask you for help with mathematics and information processing?"

"Ugh...."

Grinning at Suguha, who seemed to be at a loss for words, I stuffed a piece of buttered toast into my mouth.

Actually, I was in no state of mind to be thinking about school at the moment. There was still Asuna's situation to consider, at the same time I had no real feeling about being a student.

In the two months since I returned to the real world, I've felt uneasy without the two beloved swords on my back. I understood that this was the real world, there are no monsters which want to attack me and take my life, but I still felt uneasy. The essence of me, the «Swordsman Kirito», going to school and attending classes as «Kirigaya Kazuto», which still feels like something of a illusory existence.

That was, in my heart Sword Art Online hadn't really ended yet. Until Asuna had returned to this world, I couldn't put down my sword. After I returned her to this world— then everything could start.

Paying for the tickets using my cell phone, Suguha and I took the bus today. In the past I had always ridden my bike to the hospital, but I decided to take a little break from stamina training today.

Looking up at the hospital, Suguha's eyes widened and she blinked in surprise.

"Uwaa, it's a big hospital."

"The inside is amazing too, it's equivalent to a hotel."

Waving to the guard, Suguha and I went through the front gate. After walking a few minutes on the path that was surprisingly long by foot, we stepped into the huge, dark brown building. As Suguha seemed to have heaven-sent good health, visiting a hospital at all was rare for her, so she looked around everywhere. I had to pull her by the collar to get to the reception desk so I could ask for some passes. Riding the elevator to the top, we came out into a corridor with very few visitors.

"Here....?"

"Yes."

I nodded my head, inserting the pass card into the slot on the door. Looking at the metal plate next to the door, Suguha muttered:

"Yuuki... Asuna-san... her character name is her real name. You rarely see that kind of person."

"Oh, you know a lot. As far as I know, Asuna is the only person who used her real name..."

While we spoke, I slid the card into the slot. The orange LED light turned blue, and with a discrete sound the door opened.

A strong scented aroma drifted out from the flowers inside. Holding even the sound of my breathing, I stepped into the sleeping princess' peaceful bedroom. Suguha stuck to me as we walked in, and I could feel her tension.

Reaching for the white curtain, I, as usual, uttered a short prayer.

Then gently pulled it open.

* * *

Forgetting to breathe, Suguha looked at the girl asleep on the large bed.

At first, she thought the girl was not a human, but a fairy— the legendary ALF living at the top of the World Tree. The girl had such an otherworldly atmosphere.

Kazuto stood quietly for a time, then finally breathed out a low sigh and said:

"I shall introduce you. She is Asuna... the sub-leader of the «Knights of Blood», Asuna the «Flash», whose sword speed and accuracy were even greater than mine..."

After a little break in his speech, Kazuto lowered his eye to the girl and said:

"Asuna, this is my sister, Suguha."

Suguha walked forward a bit, then nervously said:

"...It is nice to meet you, Asuna-san."

Of course, the sleeping girl did not answer.

Suguha moved her eyes to the dark blue headgear on her head. After seeing it nearly everyday, she had come to hate the «Nerve Gear». Only the three green lights indicated the continued existence of the girl, Asuna's consciousness.

While Onii-chan was trapped in that game for two years, she had felt immense pain, and Kazuto was feeling the same right then. Suguha's heart trembled like a tree leaf on the surface of the water as she thought that.

This beautiful, fairy-like girl's soul, was locked up in an unknown world somewhere. It was too cruel. We should return her as fast as possible to the real world, back to Kazuto's side, and he would finally be able to regain his sincere smile, she thought.

But at the same time, standing next to Kazuto; his face, silently staring at the girl, was something she didn't want to see, so she silently looked down. Just a little bit, she regretted coming to this place.

When she had offered to accompany Kazuto, she thought she would be able to properly confirm her feelings today.

Since the time her mother, Midori, told her the truth, she wanted to put straight those two years of regret and longing-filled days. Was it the affection for Kazuto as an older brother or would it be falling in love with him as a cousin? She had been asking herself what she could expect from Kazuto.

Always wanting to be together— like the good relationship between siblings. Was it really only that? Training and eating together, was there anything else she wanted beyond that, or should she say there was nothing in her heart and stop there?

Since he came back two months ago, that is a question she has asked herself time and again.

She thought the answer would appear if she encountered the «girlfriend» occupying his heart.

Now, standing in silence in the golden room, she noticed her heart was afraid. It was scary to find out the answer.

Not looking at Kazuto's face, she opened her mouth wanting to say : 'I will go out to the hall so I won't disturb you' but Kazuto suddenly started walking and her timing was lost. He went around the bed and sat down in a chair at the other side. Naturally, he came into her field of view.

Kazuto took Asuna's small hand which peeked out from under white sheets in both of his hands, and silently gazed at the face of the sleeping girl. And as soon as Suguha saw his face—

"Ugh..."

A scathing pain pierced deep into her chest.

What kind of eyes were those, she thought. They were the eyes of a traveler that sought his eternally fated partner... No matter how long it took, in this life or the next, no matter how many times he was reincarnated. Eyes filled with such a gentle, calm light, containing within them a crazed feeling of love. Even their color seemed different than usual.

At that moment, Suguha knew what her heart truly wanted, and at the same time, she understood that she would never be able to reach it.

She didn't remember what she talked to Kazuto about on the way home.

When she came back to awareness, she was lying down on her bed, looking at the sky-blue poster on the ceiling.

The cell phone on her headboard made a sound. Instead of a ringtone, it was the alarm she had set before going to sleep last night. The time after the regular server maintenance was complete, 3:00 pm, and the gate to that other world opened once again.

She did not want to shed any tears in the real world. If she cried, conversely it would mean she couldn't give up, she thought.

She would let herself cry a little bit in fairyland. Then, as the cheerful Lyfa, she would quickly regain her laugh.

Suguha shut off her alarm and picked up the Amusphere next to it. She placed it on her head, laid down on her bed, closed her eyes, and let her soul fly.

The Sylph girl awoke in an inn at the outer edge of Alfheim's capital city «Aarun».

Last night— the early hours of today, to be exact, Lyfa had barely succeeded in escaping from the underground world, Jötunheimr. Carved into the roots of the World tree was a very long set of stairs. Climbing up those stairs, they had finally reached the long-awaited streets of Aarun. A

few seconds after emerging from those stairs, the big hole behind them had closed and you couldn't even tell that it existed, and it wouldn't be opened again from this side.

After that, they checked into the first inn they found, and, rubbing her eyes, Lyfa fell asleep the second she rolled into bed. Though they could only afford one room.

Lyfa got up and sat on the edge of the bed. The noise of the city, the smell of the air, even the color of her skin had changed, the only thing that didn't change was the pain piercing her heart. As if changing form, the pain gathered at the corner of her eyes and dripped out as tears.

A few dozen seconds later, the shadow of a new person appeared along with cool sound effects. Lyfa slowly raised her head.

The boy wearing only black watched Lyfa with wide eyes, but immediately spoke in a soft voice.

"What's wrong... Lyfa?"

He seemed so much like Kazuto, with a gentle smile like a night breeze. Seeing his face, a trickle of tears fell down Lyfa's face and became grains of light, dancing through the air. Lyfa managed to squeeze out a smile and said:

"You know, Kirito-kun... I... I was rejected in love."

Kirito's dark eyes were looking straight at Lyfa. Fairly mature in appearance, for an instant she was tempted to tell this mysterious boy the entire story, but clenched her teeth and throttled down the impulse.

"S... sorry, saying strange things to a person I just met. It's against the rules right, bringing problems here from the real world..."

Lyfa said quickly, trying to keep the shape of her smile. However, the tears which streamed down her face wouldn't stop at all.

Kirito gently extended his left arm, and placed his thin gloved hand on her head. Twice, three times he moved his caring hand.

"—On the other side, or here, in the hard times, it is good to cry. Just because this is a game, there is no rule forbidding you to express your emotions."

In this illusion world, there is always some clumsiness in moving or speaking. However, Kirito's soft, rhythmic voice and the movements of the hand that patted her head were very smooth. That information slowly wrapped around Lyfa's sensory nerves without anything hindering the flow.

"Kirito-kun..."

Whispering that, Lyfa lay her head on the chest of the youth sitting beside her. As her steady tears fall onto Kirito's clothes, they dissipated in a watery light.

'- I love onii-chan.'

As if to confirm it, deep in her chest came a whisper. However, it continued at once.

'- This feeling must never pass my lips. It must be locked very deep in my chest. So that someday it would be forgotten.'

Even if they were cousins, Kazuto and Suguha were raised as big brother and sister. If she showed her emotions, Kazuto, father, and mother would all be confused and troubled. More importantly, the only one in Kazuto's heart is that beautiful person...

I must forget it all.

Changing herself to Lyfa, laying her head on the chest of that mysterious youth, someday she might be able to do it, she thought.

Staying like that for a very long time, Kirito continued to pat Lyfa's head without saying anything.

Hearing a bell sound coming from far outside the window, Lyfa lifted her head and looked at Kirito's face. This time she could make the same everyday smile. Before she realized it, her tears had stopped.

"...I'm all right now. Thank you, Kirito-kun, you are very kind."

Hearing this, Kirito scratched his head, looking really embarrassed.

"A lot of people said the opposite. —Do you want to log out for today? I was thinking of doing something even by myself."

"No, I have already come this far, so I'll accompany you to the end."

Lyfa jumped off the bed and stood up. Turned a half circle, she faced Kirito and stretched out her right hand.

"—Let's Go!"

With a smile beginning at the edge of his lips, Kirito nodded and grasped Lyfa`s hand. Standing up, he suddenly started scanning the sky, as though he had forgotten something.

"Yui, are you there?"

Before that sentence was finished, light started to converge, and a familiar small pixie's figure appeared in the space between them. Rubbing her eyes with her right hand, she stretched in a big yawn.

"Fuwaa~~ Good morning Papa, Lyfa-san."

The pixie landed on Kirito`s shoulder. While looking at her face, Lyfa returned the greeting and asked a question.

"Good morning, Yui-chan. —You know, I have been wondering since yesterday... do navigation pixies actually need to sleep at night too?"

"No way, I don't do that. When papa is not here, the input signal is cut off. So I take that opportunity to verify and organize the accumulated data. You might say that it's an act similar to human sleep."

"But just now, you yawned..."

"Isn't that what people do during their start-up sequence? As for papa, the average is around eight seconds..."

"You don't need to say such strange things."

Kirito poked Yui on the forehead with his index finger, then bringing up the navigation window, equipped the greatsword on his back.

"Now, let's go!"

"Yeah!"

Lyfa nodded, and hung her own katana at her waist.

The two headed out of the inn with the morning sun fully in the sky. The NPC run shops, like the armor and item shops, were mostly open, while

night places like taverns, strange item shops and other questionable industries had a 'CLOSED' sign in front.

In real world time, it was a bit after 3pm on a weekday afternoon. After the regular weekly maintenance, the monsters and items reset and respawn, so there were far more players than expected.

Although this morning she was sleepy so she didn't look around too much, but now, looking at the large number of people out on the street was a fresh surprise.

There was a Gnome with a squat, beefy body wrapped in metal armor, carrying a huge battle axe on his back. A Puca with a little body, only standing as tall as her waist, holding a silver harp. An Imp with dark lilac skin, wearing leather armor, while walking and happily chatting with characters of various races. On a stone bench nearby, a blue-haired young man of the Undine race and a red-headed young woman of the Salamander race were looking at each other intimately, while a Cait Sith passed by with a huge wolf by his side.

Instead of the totally green cityscape of Sylvain, this was extremely bright and colorful scenery, full of vitality which set the heart ablaze. Lyfa somehow forgot the constant pain deep in her heart and had a smile floating on her face.

Even a Spriggan-Sylph couple would fit in here— thinking of that Lyfa hurried to dispel the idea. Turning her attention toward the street again—

"Wow..."

But, suddenly there was an incredible view.

Aarun was the central city of ALfheim, and from its center rose a super huge conical structure. Looking at Aarun like a panorama, it had the shape of many concentric rings, and they were still considerably far from the center.

Standing tall on the surface of Aarun's streets were some structures that were not made with light gray stone. Instead, many huge moss-green cylinders wound upward. The diameter of one of those was equivalent to a two-story building.

The cylindrical objects Aarun was built around are actually tree roots. From Jötunheimr deep below, they run through the thick ground, winding and

twisting up, becoming bigger and gathering at the top of Aarun. In other words, it could be said that Aarun mirrored the gigantic icicle below in Jötunheimr.

Lyfa looked farther up. At that moment she felt excitement running down her back.

Starting from the roots, words could not describe how massive the trunk was, it rose straight into the sky. Covered by moss and other plants, a glossy golden green trunk, which as it rose into the sky blended and faded into light blue. Around the trunk, laid a white haze which surrounded it before long. It was not fog, but clouds. They were marking the flight boundary, but the trunk continued higher and higher.

Just below the point where the trunk faded into the sky, you could somehow grasp that branches radiate outward. Thin and broad leaves covered the outer layer to where Lyfa was at as they blocked the sky. From its excessive size, the top of the world tree might have actually extended past the atmosphere of ALfheim to space —if that existed— and beyond.

"That is... the World Tree..."

Kirito whispered in an awestruck voice.

"Yes... Incredible...."

"Isn't there a city in the tree, there..."

"The fairy king Oberon and light fairy ALF lives there, and the first player race to have an audience with the king will become an ALF... That has been said."

"..."

Kirito looked at the giant tree in silence, then with a serious expression asked:

"That tree, can you climb up from the outside?"

"The area around the trunk is a restricted area, so climbing it is not possible. Even flight is impossible, you would hit the flight limit before you reached the top."

"I heard that people who piggybacked were able to exceed that limit..."

"Oh, that story."

Lyfa laughed and continued:

"They got close to the lowest branch. The GMs were in a panic, and it was soon fixed. Now, a little bit above those clouds, there is a wall."

"...I see... Anyway, let's go to the base of the tree."

"Yes. Understood."

With a light nod the two began to walk down the main street.

After a few minutes of weaving back and forth through the mixed groups of players, they came to a grand stone stairway leading up to a large gate. Through the gate lies the central city of Aarun, which lies in the center of the world. Soaring into the sky, the World Tree could only be seen as a wall in all directions.

While faced with that atmosphere, they began to climb the stairs. They were going to pass the gate when—

Yui suddenly pushed her face out of Kirito's breast pocket, and with an unusually serious face looked at the sky.

"Oh, hey... what's wrong?"

Kirito whispered to avoid notice by the people surrounding them. Lyfa also looked at the pixie's face. However, Yui remained silent with her eyes wide open looking at the top of the world tree. After a few seconds, her voice finally leaked through tight lips.

"Mama... Mama is there."

"Wha..."

Kirito's expression instantly stiffened.

"Really!?"

"There is no doubt! This Player ID is Mama's... the coordinates are straight above!"

Kirito, who heard those words, looked into the sky with burning eyes. His face became white and he clenched his teeth so hard you could even hear them grinding—

Suddenly, he expanded his wings. Flexing his dark gray wings, which suddenly glowed incandescent, Bang!! With that explosive wind sound, he disappeared from the ground.

"Wa... Wait, Kirito-kun!!"

Lyfa hurriedly cried, but the boy in black continued to soar at tremendous speed. Unsure what was going on, Lyfa spread her wings and kicked off the ground.

Straight up zoom, the same as straight down dive, are skills Lyfa excelled at, but she could not catch up to Kirito as he flew like a booster rocket, the black figure shrinking to a point as she watched.

Passing between the countless spires rising from Aarun, it took a few seconds to escape the city. From tower terraces, some players looked to see what was happening, Kirito just flew past their noses and kept heading straight up.

The buildings were finally lost to sight, replaced by the golden-green precipice of the World Tree's trunk. Flying parallel to the trunk, Kirito was like a black bullet zooming through the sky. As Kirito steadily approached the clouds, Lyfa followed and desperately cried out while enduring the wind pressure.

"Be careful, Kirito-kun!! The barrier is right in front of you!!"

But Lyfa's voice did not reach his ears. He was like an arrow connecting the heavens and earth, moving with enough speed to punch a hole in the virtual world.

What made him go so far? Who is this person at the top of the World Tree that is so important to him?

Yui called that person «Mama». A woman—? A person that can make Kirito search like this—?

As she thought that, a familiar ache started in Lyfa's heart. It felt like the pain Kazuto had caused her, but it was a false pain.

Concentration disrupted by confusion, her zoom speed dropped. Shaking off the idle thoughts, Lyfa focused her concentration on her wings.

A few seconds after Kirito, Lyfa also broke into the sea of clouds. Her vision was stained with an intense white. She had heard of it before, just

beyond the clouds was a restricted area where entry is forbidden. Lyfa slowed down a bit as she passed through the clouds.

Without any warning, a dark blue world spread out before her. Different from the view from the ground, the totally clear azure blue sky spread endlessly in all directions. Overhead, the World Tree and its branches gave the impression of a pillar supporting the heavens. Kirito was accelerating further as he aimed for one of the branches—

Suddenly, iridescent rainbow light surrounded his body.

After a few seconds, the air shook with an impact similar to the sound of a lightning bolt. Kirito had crashed into the invisible barrier, and like a black swan hit by a sniper rifle he bounced away and feebly drifted through the air.

"Kirito-kun!!"

Lyfa screamed, hurrying to get over to him. If you fell from this height, your HP would disappear, and the effects could even be dragged into the real world after logout.

But before she could catch Kirito, he seemed to regain consciousness. He shook his head two or three times, once again rising. Immediately, he was blocked by the barrier, scattering light in his attempt.

Finally, Lyfa flew to the same height as Kirito and grabbed his arm, crying desperately:

"Stop, Kirito-kun!! It's impossible to go beyond there!!"

But, Kirito's eyes shining with bewitched light, kept trying to go forward.

"I've got to go.... I've got to go no matter what!!"

He focused only on the point where the branch of the World Tree split the sky. Despite being much clearer than it was from the ground, the branch still seemed to be a good distance away, judging by its low detail.

At that time, Yui flew out of his breast pocket. Emitting brilliant particles of light, she flew toward the branch.

That's right, a system navigation pixie might... Lyfa suddenly thought, but the invisible barrier didn't allow Yui's small body to pass. Like waves on the surface of water, seven-colored lights pushed Yui back.

But, Yui looking unlike a program, desperately shoved her hands into the barrier, then opened her mouth.

"The warning mode voice might be able to get through...! Mama! It's me!! Mama!!"

* * *

"...!!"

Suddenly, hearing a faint cry, Asuna lifted her face which she was resting on the table.

Hurriedly looking around the room, there was no one else in the golden cage. Not even the small azure bird that sometimes came to play. Only shadows cast by the sun on the cage lattice.

Dismissing it as imagination, as she put her hands back on the table.

"...Mama...!!"

This time she definitely heard it. Asuna kicked the chair away and stood up.

It was a little girl's voice. That thin voice like a silver bell resonated strongly with a far-off memory.

"Yu... Yui-chan, is it you...!?"

Asuna said in a faint voice, rushing to the walls of her cage. Gripping the metal bars with both hands, she looked around frantically.

"Mama... I'm here...!!"

The voice seemed to sound directly in Asuna's mind, giving no indication of direction. But she still felt it. It was from below, no matter how much she looked, the white sea of clouds surrounding the huge tree blocked her vision, the sound was no doubt coming from below.

"I'm... I'm here...!!"

Asuna cried as loud as she could.

"I`m here...!! Yui-chan...!!"

If Yui, the «daughter» she had met in the other world was here, then surely «he» was also here.

"...Kirito-kun—!!"

She didn't know if her voice could reach him. Asuna looked around the bird cage. There must be something she could use to make him aware of her existence other than her voice -.

An object, but everything in this room was locked in place by its positional information, none of them could be moved out of the cage, she'd found out. Long ago, she had tried to use a teacup and a cushion to send a message to players below, but it didn't work. Asuna anxiously held the golden cage grid.

No—

There was. Only one thing. An object that did not previously exist in this location. An irregular object.

Asuna ran to the bed, and pulled it from underneath the pillow. It was a small silver key card. She returned to the lattice. She held out her right hand with the card fearfully. If it was like before, she would be thwarted by a barrier.

"...!!"

Her right hand reached outside of the cage with no resistance. The clear silver card shining brightly with reflected sunlight.

'... Kirito-kun... please notice this!!'

While praying, Asuna did not hesitate to open her hand. The card quietly danced through the air, falling straight down toward the sea of clouds below and flashing in the light.

* * *

Torn with impatience, I felt as though my body would be torn into a thousand pieces, and struck the barrier with my right hand. My fist was flipped by a repulsive force that resembled strong magnets with the same poles touching, and iridescent ripples spread through the air.

"What is it... this thing...!"

I managed to stammer through clenched teeth.

Finally— I came so far. The prison that held Asuna's soul was just right there. Nevertheless, the program code within the «game system» was blocking my path.

A tremendous self-destructive impulse flowed through my whole body, scattering white-hot sparks.

Logging into ALfheim Online for two days, I had come here in accordance with the rules of the game, pushing back my impatience, but the irritation that continually accumulated in the depths of my heart exploded out all at once. Baring my dog-like fangs, I grasped the hilt of my sword in my right hand.

—At the moment.

Beyond the white flame in my vision, a small white light shone.

"...That is...?"

I forgot my rage in an instant and stared at that light. Something that shone brightly was slowly falling toward me. Like snow in the midsummer sky, like dandelion fluff on long journey, it fell toward me.

While hovering, I released the hilt of my sword, and held out my hands toward the light. After a few very long seconds, the white light slowly settled into my hands. With the feeling of nostalgic warmth, I slowly opened my hands in front of my chest.

Yui looked from my left and Lyfa from my right. I silently stared at what was in my hands.

"...A card...?"

Lyfa muttered. It certainly was a small rectangular card-type object. It had a transparent silver surface with no text or decoration. Turning to look at Lyfa, I said:

"Lyfa, do you know what this is...?"

"No... I've never seen an item like this. Why not try clicking on it?"

Following Lyfa's suggestion, I did a single-click on the surface of the card with my finger-tip. A simple click on the game item should have caused a pop-up window to appear, but nothing was displayed.

Yui leaned forward and touched the edge of the card, before exclaiming:

"This... this is the access code for system management!!"

"!?..."

I held my breath, staring at the card in my hand.

"...So, if I have this, I can exercise GM authority?"

"No... You can access the system, but you must do it from the corresponding console... Even I can't call out the system menu..."

"I see... but such a thing wouldn't fall down without reason. This is probably...."

"Yes. I think mama noticed us and dropped it to us."

"..."

I clasped the card gently. Not long ago, Asuna was holding it. I thought I could vaguely understand her intentions.

Asuna was also fighting. To escape this world, she was resisting strongly. I too have something I must do.

I stared at Lyfa and said:

"Lyfa, tell me. Where is the gate that leads into the World Tree?"

"Eh... It is in the dome at the foot of the tree..."

Lyfa said with a worried frown.

"But, it is impossible. It is protected by an army of guardians, thus far no matter how big the group, they couldn't get past it."

"Even so, I have to go."

I put the card in my breast pocket and took Lyfa's hand.

Thinking about it, this Sylph girl had helped me a lot. When I didn't know left from right in this world, with a rush of feeling, I came all the way here. It

was thanks to her knowledge and her cheerful smile that encouraged me all the way. Someday, I'll properly explain the situation and thank her in the real world... While thinking that I opened my mouth.

"Thank you very much thus far, Lyfa. From here, I'll go by myself."

"...Kirito-kun..."

With Lyfa's face that seemed about to cry, I grasped her hands tightly before letting go. Yui went to sit on my shoulder as I retreated a bit further.

Finally, looking at the girl one last time, her ponytail swaying with her flight, I bowed deeply. Then turned my back on her.

Closing my wings, I rode the momentum gained with the acceleration of a fall as I sped right toward the base of the World Tree.

After diving dizzily for tens of seconds, the bottom of the World Tree and the intricate city surrounding it, Aarun, appeared. Between the roots and the city laid a shockingly large veranda, and I started breaking in preparation for landing.

I opened my wings fully for breaking while aiming for the landing point. I stuck my legs out below me, and tried to stop as my feet hit the pavement. Even with the breaking, a loud boom echoed from the sonic boom accompanying me. Several players on the terrace for viewing the surroundings turned their faces toward me with a surprised look on their faces.

Waiting until they turned away, I spoke to Yui, still sitting on my shoulder, in an undertone.

"Yui, do you know the way to the Dome?"

"Yes, it is straight up those steps. But— Is it ok, papa? According to the available information, breaking through the gate is very difficult."

"We'll just have to try forcing it. Even if I fail, it doesn't mean I will die."

"That is, true, but..."

I reached out and gently stroked Yui's head.

"Anyway, it feels as though I might go mad if I waste even one more second. Even Yui wants to see mama as soon as possible right?"

"...Yes."

Yui nodded, and nuzzled my cheek as I started walking up the steps.

Nearing the top of the steps, we already seemed to be at the top of Aarun city. The huge cone shaped roots gathered in front of us at that one place on the trunk. The diameter was too big, all that could be seen from there was a simple curved wall.

Near that wall, two fairy knight statues rose standing nearly ten times the height of a player. Between the statues was a splendidly decorated stone gate. That was the starting point of the grand quest, and no other players could be seen anywhere. Perhaps, the story about it being «impossible to breakthrough» had already became common knowledge.

But I had to go through the door, breaking through the guardians and reaching the gate.

'- Wait for me, Asuna. I'm coming right now...'

It was a promise I engraved on my heart.

Continuing a few dozen meters further, I stood in front of the gate when the right statue moved and a low tone resounded. It looked around unexpectedly for a bit, then with a pale light shining from its eyes, it looked down at me and opened its mouth. A ponderous voice resounded, it was like a rolling boulder.

"You who don't know the heights of heaven, wish to reach the king's castle?"At the same time, in front of me, a window appeared, asking me if I want to accept the final challenge. To ascertain my will two buttons appeared: [YES] and [NO]. With no hesitation, I pressed the [YES] button.

This time, the huge stone statue on the left issued a loud voice.

"You shall receive unlimited use of your wings from here onward."

Before the thunderous reverb disappeared, the door split apart from the center. As the earth trembled, the doors opened inward to the left and right.

That roar, inevitably reminded me of fighting the floor boss monsters in Aincrad. Forgetting to breathe at the resurrected tension, a cold shiver ran down my spine.

Here, dying doesn't mean real death, I said to myself, then had to shake off the thought. This is a struggle for Asuna`s freedom, in some ways, it is more important than any battle I had ever been in.

"We're going, Yui. Make sure to hide well."

"Papa... Do your best."

I patted Yui on the head as she pulled back into my breast pocket, then I drew my sword.

When the thick stone door was fully open, the roaring sound stopped. It was completely dark inside. Just as I stepped in, I considered using night vision magic. Before I even lifted my right hand, a sudden burst of blinding light poured down from above. I subconsciously narrowed my eyes.

Inside was a huge dome space. It reminded me of the Boss room on the 75th floor of Aincrad where I had fought with Heathcliff, only the diameter was several times bigger.

It seemed like the inside of a tree, large roots wove together to form the floor. Ivy rose from the floor to cover the walls, going up and connecting to the top.

The canopy was a clear hemispherical dome, the ivy entwining to form stained glass-like patterns, through which white light poured.

Near the top of the canopy, I saw a door. It was an exquisitely decorated ring-shaped gate with a cross-shape splitting the door into four pieces. The road to the top of the tree must be on the other side.

Holding my greatsword in both hands, I took a deep breath. Putting power into my legs, I spread my wings.

"—Go!!"

I fiercely cried to myself, and kicked hard off of the ground.

Before I had flown for even one second, an anomaly appeared in the light filtering through the canopy. One portion of the window turned white as it boiled and bubbled, it looked like something was about to happen. In an instant, that part of the dome dripped, and as it fell, it took on a humanoid form, spreading four shining wings as it roared.

The knight's massive body was entirely clad in silver armor, and was wearing a mirror mask, so its face could not be seen. The right hand held a sword even larger than mine. No doubt, this was the guardian that Lyfa was talking about.

The guardian knight turned its mirror face toward the rapidly rising me and dove with what would have been a shout save for the lack of human speech.

"Get out of the waaaaay!!"

I shouted and swung my greatsword. The distance between us neared zero, the feeling of a cold spark played over my brain, it's the accelerated feeling I always got when I was fighting at my limits in that world. Facing the guardian knight, with my figure reflecting off its mask, I brought my sword down without hesitation.

The guardian knight's sword intersected with mine in mid-air, and the space was torn asunder by light effects similar to lightning. The knight brought its hugely rebounded sword over its head for another strike, I just let my sword move as it wanted and rushed at the knight's chest. I caught the neck of the knight that was double my size with my left hand, staying close to it.

When fighting monsters controlled by the CPU, I would find out its attack range and try to stay in a position outside of it, but in the case of such a huge enemy, blind spots often appear at the least suitable moments. Of course, it is very dangerous to stop there for long, but there was time while it tried to recover from a stance that had collapsed.

Bringing back my right hand with the sword, I stabbed into the knight's unprotected neck.

"Raaa!!"

I beat my wings hard, and used my full weight to push the sword in. Gatsu!! With the sound of a hard object breaking, my sword went through its neck.

"Gogaaaaaa!!"

Unlike its awe-inspiring divine appearance, it let out a bestial roar and then stiffened. Shortly after, the huge body was wrapped in a white End Frame, which quickly dispersed.

'- I can do it!!'

My heart cried out with joy. The guardian knight's stats fell short of the floor bosses of SAO. For one-on-one, I have the advantage.

I shook off the white flame that still clung to me and looked at gate. I saw a scene that made the smile on my face freeze.

All of the stained glass windows in the still far off, huge canopy were in a chaotic state, the silver clad knights appearing from all of them. There were dozens— no, hundreds.

"—Uoooooo!!"

I whipped myself, who had been daunted for an instant, and shouted. No matter how many come, I just have to kill them all. I beat my wings and dashed fiercely.

Several of the newly born knights descended from the canopy to block my path. I aimed at the front one and moved my sword.

This time I avoided the loss of balance caused by crossing swords, and concentrated on the tip of the enemy's sword, I twisted my body, evading it. Not completely avoiding it, the enemy's sword scratched my shoulder, causing slight damage, but I ignored it, focusing all of my senses on attacking my enemy.

My big sword moved along a straight line, impacting the mask, killing my second opponent. White flame spewed from the knight, before it disappeared another knight moved in to take its place.

The next knight had already begun its attack, I ground my teeth. Deciding that I wouldn't have enough time completely evade it, I lifted my left hand and blocked it with my armor.

With a strike that impacted on bone, out of the left corner of my eyes, I saw my HP bar decrease by about 10%. But the enemy's sword swing was diverted by my arm, so the knight's stance collapsed. Aiming for its neck, the sword in my right hand came down.

But this time my speed was reduced and I could not kill it in one hit. Furthermore, another knight was rushing over from the right. I twisted my body to the right and kicked my left foot at the damaged knight's mask.

Having the swordsman Kirito's status data carried over to this world was lucky, including the unarmed combat skill level that I thought was useless here. My kick removed the rest of this knight's HP. The big body leaning back was wrapped in flames and let loose a scream distorted by the effect.

I blocked the third knight's sword at the last moment with my sword.

"Seaaaa!!"

Together with the cries, I clenched my left fist and thrust at its mirror mask. Crack!! With that sound, cracks radiated out from the point of impact and it let out an anguished cry.

"Fall!! Fallll!!"

I shouted. This feeling was unlike the time in Jötunheimr fighting the Undine soldiers, a searing impulse for destruction drove me. The sword in my right hand sawed at the knight's neck, I punched the knight with my left hand over and over.

That's right— I once lived in this world. Wandering alone in one of the deepest dungeons, fighting at the line of death to forge my soul, I used monsters' corpses to build my tombstone as I continued to swing my sword.

My fist finally went through the knight's mask, and luminous lights scattered. I was still lost in that inner voice of destruction, and I thrust my left fist into the depths of the light. As my hand went through its head, the knight's whole body melted and broke apart, and the white flame surrounded my body.

At that time, my heart was as hard and dry as a stone. Game clear or player liberation, none of it mattered anymore. I rejected others and thrust myself into the next battle.

Four or five more guardian knights raised their shining swords, and they fell with a sound like the voice of an onimous bird. A grim smile emerged from the side of my face, and I burst into the knights, my wings splitting the air. Every nerve in my body shook with a feeling of fierce acceleration, the electric pulses connecting my body here with my brain became white sparks crossing my vision.

"Uoooaaaaa!!"

With a courageous shout, I slashed horizontally with the sword I now held with both hands. I repelled the enemies' swords. Rotating like a windmill, I accelerated to the limit aiming my sword at the guardian knights' neck.

Chop, Chopp!! With a continuous dull sound, two necks that held the mirror masks danced through the air. The flame that appeared with their last moments formed a white rose that washed over my nerves, sending more heat over my body.

Only in the jaws of death could I see my own life. Throwing oneself into the last-minute battle, burning one's spirit til the end, and then falling, I thought that was the only way I could repay those who had fallen before my eyes.

I turned around, and without losing any of the force of my spin, the toes of my right foot struck out, now more like a drill. My foot struck the chest of the guardian knight, and I felt within the hardness a soft moistness that came with unpleasant sounds as my foot penetrated the knight's body. As my body stopped at the center of the End Frame, two swords approached me from the left and right, like a pair of scissors. I blocked the sword on my right with my sword and the one on my left with my arm, and taking no notice of my HP bar, I countered.

I quickly grabbed the wrist of the knight on my right side,

"Guuuuooooo!!"

With a roar, I swung the right knight over my head and threw it into the one on the left. I followed through and stabbed them both when they were locked together, giving them a fatal blow.

I thought I could keep fighting and massacring enemies no matter how many appeared. In those days, I was burning myself in the flame of the homicide, I polished my heart until it was as stone -.

No— that wasn't it...

—Onto that heart which was increasingly dry, there were people who desperately poured water. Klein, Agil, Silica, Lisbeth, and Asuna.

I... I will help Asuna, to make that world truly end, I came here—

I lifted my head and turned toward the canopy, I found the stone gate was surprisingly close.

As I struggled to fly to it, something pierced my right leg.

It was a cold, shining light arrow. As if they had been waiting for me to stop moving, arrows poured down like rain. I was hit with two, three consecutive arrows, my HP greatly reduced.

Looking around, I didn't know since when, but the guardian knights were surrounding me from a far distance, all pointed at me with their left hands, chanting spells in harshly distorted sound. The second wave of light arrows flew at me with a high-pitched sound.

"Uooooo!"

I swung my greatsword around me, blocking many of the arrows, but several still hit me, dropping my HP into the yellow area. I lifted my face, staring at the gate.

It was difficult to overthrow long-ranged enemies by myself. I moved forward, trying to break through the gate. The arrows of light were penetrating my entire body, but my goal was right there. Enduring the attacks, I stretched my left hand to touch the stone door -.

—But.

Only a few seconds to go, my back suffered a tremendous impact. When I turned around, a guardian knight had approached me, with a distorted version of my smile looking at me, it had thrust its sword into my back. My posture collapsed and my acceleration stopped.

Then, Like a flock of white birds swooping on prey, dozens of guardian knights rushed from all directions. With a Dotsu dotsu sound, my body was pierced by sword after sword. I didn't even have time to check my HP.

My vision was suddenly filled with a phosphorescent black flame. It took a while to notice that it was my own End Frame. Beyond the black flames, small purple letters emerged. [You are dead].

The next moment, there was a dry sound and my body dissolved.

Like one switch after another being turned off, the sense of my body disappeared.

When I was killed on the 75th floor of Aincrad in the final fight with Heathcliff, I clearly remembered when I fell. As that memory flashed through my mind, I was enveloped by a violent terror.

But of course, there was no interruption of my consciousness. Is this half conscious? I had experienced «death in the game», but not since the beta testing of SAO.

It was a strange feeling. My sight lost color as it faded to a monotone purple. In the center of my vision were letters in the color of a system notice saying [Remaining Revival Time], with a decreasing number to the right. In the far side of my view, the silver guardian knights that killed me seemed satisfied and returned to the stain-glass in the canopy.

There was no sense of my extremities. I couldn't move, all that was left of me in this world was the small embers of my Remain Light like all of the people I killed in this world. I was lost in helpless, miserable, trivial feelings.

Yes— I was so miserable. Maybe somewhere inside I still felt that this was just a game, and this was the retribution for feeling that way. After all, my strength was just a few numbers in my status data. Yet, beyond the boundaries of the game, beyond the limits, I thought I could do anything I wanted to.

I wanted to meet Asuna. I wanted to wrap her in my arms, to lose those feelings and thoughts and finally heal. But now my hands could no longer reach her.

The second display was decreasing. I wondered what would happen when it reached zero, I could not remember.

No matter what happens, there is only one thing I can do. I would crawl back to this place and challenge the guardian knights again. No matter how many time I fell, even if I understood that I couldn't win— Even if my spirit was worn down, until the moment I completely disappear from this world—...

At that moment, a shadow sailed across my vision looking below.

Someone invaded the open dome and raced up toward me with terrible acceleration.

'Don't come', I tried to yell, but my voice didn't come out. Looking up at the windows, I saw that it was once again lined with white and guardian knights that were being produced.

White giants shouted as they passed by my side in their headlong rush for the intruder. From my experience just before, I already knew that one person would not be able to fight them. 'Hurry and run away', I desperately prayed, but the shadow shot up toward me in a straight line.

The guardian knights in the front row grasped their swords and brought them down in sequence. The intruder evaded the attacks with agile and alert movements, but the time lagged attack made the sword graze the intruder. The delicate body went into a big tumble.

But the intruder used that tumble to accelerate further, slipped past the rows of knights and kept rising. As the intruder drew closer to me, more knights appeared to stop that, with a strange chorus, they flew around a narrow space.

The shadow's right hand held a katana, but that was only used for defense. Avoiding the enemy groups and parrying with dazzling movements, it came closer and closer. It was a painfully desperate flight.

When she finally arrived in front of me, the player's tears scattered as she cried:

"—Kirito-kun!!"

It was Lyfa. The Sylph girl stretched out her hands and wrapped me tightly in her arms.

We are already very close to the gate, but the knights would never allow us to rise, they closely crowded in the sky, creating a wall of flesh several layers thick. But having secured me, Lyfa quickly turned and flew, this time aimed straight for the exit.

From the rear, curse like spell chanting rose. Immediately, arrows of light came flying. Lyfa wove from side to side, avoiding the aim of the enemy, but the arrows rained down so densely that it wasn't possible to evade them all. One of them hit her and the shock reached even me.

"Ug...!!"

Lyfa choked out, but her dive speed didn't decrease. Lyfa's body was pierced by arrows in quick succession. In my vision, her HP was swiftly cut in half.

Arrows of light were not the only thing chasing us. There were two guardian knights chasing, fast and furious. I could see swords swinging down from the left and right in a cross.

Lyfa did a quick right spin, avoiding one sword, but the other caught her squarely in the back.

"Ah..."

With her cry, Lyfa was thrown like a ball, crashing into the ground. After bouncing several times, we slid on the ground, eventually coming to a stop. There, several knights descended to make a fatal blow.

Lyfa pushed her body up with a trembling hand, and flapped her wings once. That made her roll— bright light suddenly surrounded my vision. We were already outside the dome.

* * *

Surviving that hopeless situation, Lyfa stretched out her body, chilled with fear, on the cobblestones. Turning back to the door, having passed the time allotted for the event, the door was closing and the white giants were soaring up behind it.

In her hands, the small black flame flickered. Kirito-kun -, Lyfa cried in her heart, but there was no time to be immersed in those sad sentiments. She sat up, and leaning against the leg of the huge stone statue, waved her right hand and opened the item window.

Since Lyfa hadn't mastered water and holy attribute magic, she couldn't cast the high-leveled revival magic. So she turned «Sap of the World Tree» into an item, and she picked up the small blue bottle that materialized.

Dismissing the window, she uncorked the bottle and sprinkled the shining liquid over Kirito's Remain Light. A three-dimensional magic circle similar to that of revival magic unfolded in an instant. A few seconds later, the figure of a boy in black materialized.

"...Kirito-kun..."

Still sitting down, Lyfa called his name, smiling through her tears. Kirito also knelt on the stone pavement with a harrowed smile, placed his right hand on her hand.

"Thank you, Lyfa... But, don't be that reckless again. I'll be fine... I don't want to cause you any more trouble."

"Troubled... I...."

'Am not troubled at all', She was going to say, but Kirito stood up first. He turned away and started walking— again toward the door leading into the World Tree.

"Ki-Kirito-kun!!"

She was stunned in amazement. Lyfa put strength to her trembling legs, and somehow stood up.

"Wa, wait... It is impossible for a single person!"

"Maybe so... But I must go..."

Kirito whispered with his back turned. Lyfa felt like a glass image pushed to the limits, desperately trying to find the words. But she wasn't able to speak the words burning in her throat. Her arms stretched out in a daze, she held Kirito's body tightly.

She's being attracted, she strongly felt. In order to give up on Kazuto, she forced herself to love this person in her heart, at the same time, she thought this might be fine. She felt that this feeling seemed to be true.

"Enough... Stop already... Return to the usual Kirito-kun... I... I, Kirito-kun..."

Kirito gently held her right hand in his hands. A quiet, intense voice flowed into her ear.

"Lyfa... I'm sorry... If I don't go there, nothing will end, and nothing will start. I must see her, again..."

"Again... Asuna..."

Lyfa did not understand what she had heard for a moment. Her mind had gone blank, and Kirito's reverberation slowly faded away.

"...Now... now, what... did you say...?"

Kirito tilted his head, looking slightly puzzled and replied:

"Ah... Asuna, that is the name of the person I'm looking for."

"But... I mean, that person is..."

As her hands covered her mouth, Lyfa took a half step back.

While her mind was frozen, afterimages of memories revived.

A few days ago, when she had sparred with Kazuto in the dojo.

When they first met, Kirito had beaten the Salamanders in the Ancient Forest.

The two people in her memory, when the battle was over, slashed with the sword in their right hand and quickly put it away on their back. The exact same movement.

With a burst of insight, the two silhouettes melted together. Lyfa's eyes went wide open, and from trembling lips barely forced out a voice.

"... Are you... onii-chan...?"

"Huh...?"

Kirito heard these words and his eyebrows went up in surprise. His dark eyes looked directly into Lyfa's eyes. The light floated in the pupils like the moon swaying on the surface of the water, then—

"—Sugu... Suguha...?"

The Spriggan in black whispered in a sound that's barely a voice, calling that name.

The stone pavement, the surroundings of Aarun, and the whole world with the huge World Tree seemed to be collapsing. Lyfa / Suguha staggered back a few steps.

While travelling with that person for the past few days, Lyfa had felt that the virtual world was more vivid. Her heart was excited just to fly side by side.

Suguha adored Kazuto, Lyfa liked Kirito, if she said she wasn't feeling guilt, that would be a lie. However, it was Kirito that taught her that ALfheim wasn't just an extension of a virtual flight simulator like she had thought for

a long time, but a whole new reality. That is why Lyfa was able to realize that the feelings that she had in this world were not just digital data, but her true feelings.

She forcefully froze her feelings for wanting Kazuto, even her deeply buried pain, will eventually be forgotten if she stayed by Kirito's side, she felt like that. —Yet it is true that this «reality» was given form by the spirits of the «real» humans that come here, but still it was an unexpected result.

"...How cruel... This is just too much, this..."

Lyfa shook her head left and right, talking like someone delirious. More than that, she didn't want to stay in that place for even one more second. She turned away from Kirito, and waved her left hand.

Touching the lower left corner of the window, she almost ignored the confirmation message, and pressed. Under firmly closed eyelids, the rainbow faded, leaving only darkness.

Waking up in her bed, the first thing she saw was the deep blue ALfheim sky. Where that color had always invoked feelings of nostalgia and longing before, now there was only pain.

Suguha slowly took the Amusphere off her head, and held it in front of her eyes.

"U... u..."

Sobs which she couldn't hold back leaked from the depths of her throat. She applied a little more strength to her two hands holding the delicate machine with its two ornate circles. The ring bent with a faint scream.

She would destroy the AmuSphere and shut the passage to that world forever, she thought. However, she couldn't do it. The girl by the name of Lyfa on the other side of the rings was just too pitiful.

Throwing the machine onto the bed, Suguha sat up. She put her feet on the ground, closed her eyes, and bowed her head. She didn't want to think about anything anymore.

The silence was broken by a modest knock. Then, from beyond the door, came a voice that was different from Kirito's, but it had the same cadence.

"—Sugu, can I?"

"Stop!! Don't open the door!"

She cried out of reflex.

"Let me be alone... for a while..."

"—What happened, Sugu? I was surprised too, but..."

Filled with confusion, Kazuto's words continued.

"...If you are angry that I used the Nerve Gear again, I apologize. But it was absolutely necessary."

"No, it's not that."

In a moment, conflicting feelings spread throughout her body. She jumped out of the bed and went to the door.

She turned the handle and opened the door, there was the figure of Kazuto. His eyes were full of worry as he looked at her.

"I... I..."

Her feelings, with her tears overflow out.

"I— betrayed my heart. Betrayed my feelings of loving onii-chan."

Finally saying 'love' face to face with her target person, but that was like a blade piercing her chest, throat, and lips. Feeling the searing pain, continued in a hoarse voice.

"I forgot everything, gave up, and was just going to love Kirito, I thought. No, I had already. —And yet... Even though..."

"What..."

For a few seconds, Kazuto was at a loss for words, then he said in a whisper.

"Love... me... But, we are..."

"I know."

"...What...?"

"I already know."

'I can't', she thought. But she couldn't stop. With her glance embedded with all of that passion looking at Kazuto, she spoke through trembling lips the following declaration.

"Onii-chan and I are not true siblings. I've known since two years ago!!"

Oh no. Her mother had wanted her to wait before telling Kazuto that she knew about this, it's not for her to use this as a weapon for her remaining feelings. The reason she was told was so she could use the time to think about it, she thought.

"The reason onii-chan gave up on kendo and started avoiding me, you knew this long ago right? I am not your real sister so you put me at a distance right? Then, why are you so kind to me now!!"

No matter how bad it is, she couldn't hold in the words anymore. As Suguha's voice reverberated in the cold air in the corridor, Kazuto's black eyes gradually lost their expression.

"I... was very happy when onii-chan came back from SAO. I was glad we had finally been able to regain the relationship we had as children. You finally looked at me, I thought."

Finally, she could not bear anymore, and the tears came streaming down her face. Suguha harshly rubbed her eyes, and to her limits forced her voice out of her chest.

"... But... if I knew this would be the case, maybe it would have been better if onii-chan had remained cold to me. In that case, I wouldn't know that I love onii-chan... Or find out about Asuna-san and feel sad... Then I wouldn't have to love Kirito to replace you!!"

When he heard these words Kazuto's eyes got a little wide, and he looked stiff. After a few seconds, while time seemed stopped, Kazuto shook his head and said sadly,

"...I'm sorry..."

Since he woke up two months ago, Kazuto's eyes that looked at Suguha usually had a caring and gentle light shining in them. But now, that light was faded, in exchange a deep darkness was exposed there. Suguha was filled with severe pain, as though her heart was cut with the blade of regret.

"...Just, leave me alone."

She didn't want to see Kazuto's face any longer. While being crushed with guilt and self-loathing, Suguha closed the door to run away and took a few steps back. Her heel touching her bed, she fell back as she collapsed.

Curled up with a sheet wrapped around her body, her shoulders trembled as sobs racked her body. Then the tears began to fall, leaving marks on the white linen sheets while being absorbed by it.

* * *

With the door closed in front of me, I stood there for a while.

Soon, I turned and slid to the floor with my back against her door.

Suguha's accusation that I had distanced myself from her because she wasn't my true younger sister was almost correct. I had searched the net for my family registry, but I had found the deletion notice, so I asked my parents about it. I was ten years-old. I began to put some distance between Suguha and myself, but there was no specific reason.

At that time, I did not understand the meaning of the distance between other people.

I did not have any memory of my real parents, Kirigaya Minetaka and Midori had told me the truth, but their love for me did not change so I was not really hurt. However, a seed of a strange feeling was planted in me, by the time it started to bud, it was already deeply rooted.

That is, for someone who didn't even know their relatives, who is that person really? That was my question. I came to think of a family as a set of acquaintances with a long relationship, someone who knows everything. I wondered who that person would actually be. Did I really know someone like that?

That sense of incongruity may be one of the reasons that led me to dive into the world of online games. There, the avatars that came in contact over the network were naturally different within the game. No one really knew who each other was. On this premise we interacted, that was to say it was a false world, that was something I found pleasant. By the time I was a 5th or 6th grader, I was already addicted to net games, without a side glance I moved straight forward. Finally I was imprisoned for two years, in that virtual world.

The world of Sword Art Online would have been something of a utopia for me, if not for the game's rule of death. A false dream that I wouldn't wake up from. The virtual world that could never end.

In that world, I played Kirito, who no one knew.

However, in the abnormal situation of a FullDive net game where I couldn't log out, I was led without force to one inevitable truth.

Whether it was the real world or a virtual world, it was essentially identical.

Because humans understand their world by receiving the information from the five senses that had been processed by the brain. The only reason a net game is a false world is that you can leave by switching off the machine.

A world that your brain recognized through electronic pulses, a world that you can't log out of.

Those are words that describe the real world itself.

When I realized that, I finally realized the emptiness of the question that had been confusing me since the age of ten. Worrying about who people really were was something with no meaning. The only thing you were able to do is believe what you see, and accept it. The person that I recognize is the true person.

From the door I had my back to came Suguha's sobbing.

When I returned to the real world, the moment I first saw her face, I was honestly glad to see her. I wanted to shorten the distance that I had built over a few years because of my meaningless question, we would rebuild our bonds, I would approach her because I wanted to.

However, perhaps Suguha had also gained a new awareness of me over these past two years. She knew that her onii-chan was actually her cousin, and was likely trying to come to terms with the distance I had put between us. I who thought that she didn't know the truth wasn't able to notice her feelings.

To this Suguha, I had shown my feelings for Asuna many times. I had cried in front of her thinking of Asuna. It wasn't hard to imagine how deeply I had hurt Suguha.

No, it was not just that.

Perhaps the reason the PC tone-deaf Suguha had started playing VRMMO games was also me. To know my world, Suguha dove into the virtual world, and after a long time nurtured another her. The person who helped me many times in ALfheim, Lyfa— who was the real Suguha.

Yui had hypothesized that the reason I met her after I first logged in was because someone in my neighborhood had connected to ALO at the same time as me. Because we made our dives not from the same neighborhood, but the same house, our global IP address was identical. So, after I naturally encountered Lyfa, the only thing in my head was Asuna, and I hurt Lyfa like I had hurt Suguha.

I closed my eyes so tightly that when I opened them they seemed to make noise, and stood up with all of the power in my legs.

Now, I will do what I could for Suguha. When words were not enough, stretching out your hands, in the world of SAO, many people had taught me that with their whole self.

* * *

A strong knock sounded on the door, pulling Suguha out of her stupor. Out of reflex, she cowered.

'Don't open the door', she was going to shout, but the only thing that leaked from her throat was a blurred voice. However, Kazuto started speaking without turning the door knob.

"Sugu... I'll be waiting for you on the terrace in the north side of Aarun."

It was a calm voice, a gentle voice. She felt that he then moved from the front of her door. After the sound of a door opening and closing across the hall, silence fell.

Suguha closed her eyes tightly and curled up again. The tears began falling again, making a dripping sound.

Kazuto's voice was not the least bit shaken. Could he have just swallowed the terrible words she had showered upon him?

'- You're so strong, onii-chan. I can't be that strong...'

While whispering in her heart, she remembered the night a few days ago.

That night, Kazuto was like her now, curled up on his bed. Exactly the same thing, thinking about the beloved one he was unable to reach. It was the shape of a lost child.

It was the next day that she met Kirito. That is, Kazuto had found out that while Asuna's body slept, her consciousness was in ALfheim— on the World Tree towering above. He threw himself into the virtual world again. Wiped his tears, with sword in hand.

—At that time, she said good luck to him. She had told him not to give up. However, she herself was continuing to cry like this...

Suguha slowly opened her eyes. A glorious, round crown was placed in front of her.

Reaching out and taking it she placed it over her head.

Sunlight poured down from the partially cloudy sky and shone gently on the ancient styled streets of Aarun.

Looking around the log in point, Kirito's figure could not be seen. Checking the map, she could see that she was in the south plaza outside the dome of the world tree, and the north side seemed to have a large terrace for events. He was probably waiting there for Lyfa.

Although she had come here, she was still scared about the meeting. She didn't know what she should say or what to expect she would hear. Taking several despondent steps, Lyfa sat down on a bench in the corner of the plaza.

She couldn't be sure how long she sat with her head down. Suddenly, someone landed in front of her. She reflexively hardened her body and closed her eyes.

However, the person who called her name was a surprise.

"Finally... I was looking for you, Lyfa-chan!"

A familiar, cheerful, but unreliable voice echoed. She lifted her head while dumbfounded, there stood the figure of the yellow-green haired Sylph boy.

"...R, Recon!?"

Seeing this unexpected face, Lyfa instantly forgot the pain she was in, and asked him why he would be there. Recon placed his hands on his hips, puffed out his chest and said in a proud voice:

"Well, after Sigurd left, my paralysis wore off so I killed the two Salamanders with poison and escaped from the underground waterway. I was going to kill Sigurd with poison too but he wasn't in the Sylph capital, so I decided to go to Aarun too. I passed through the mountain range, training[5] active monsters on people on the way, and I finally arrived in Aarun this morning. It really took a full night."

"...You, that is pure MPK[6]..."

"Don't worry about the small details at this time!"

Recon did not care about Lyfa's accusatory words, he seemed cheerful, and sat down close to her. Seeing Lyfa alone, he was puzzled, as he looked around the surrounding area, asked.

"What happened to that Spriggan? Is your party disbanding?"

"Well..."

Looking for the right words, Lyfa fidgeted, shifting her hips uncertainly. However, it was like there was a lump of constant ache in her chest, no skillful excuses seem to float up. When she realized, she was already saying what was buried in her heart.

"...I, said terrible things to that person... Even though I loved him, I said things that I shouldn't to hurt him... I am, a fool..."

Tears almost overflowed again, but Lyfa desperately held them back. Recon / Nagata was just her classmate, above that this is the virtual world, she didn't want to bare emotions that would confuse him. So she quickly turned away and continued in rapid speech.

"I'm sorry to have said such strange things. Forget it. I won't meet that person anymore... Let's go home, to Sylvain."

Even if she tried to escape here, the two of them in reality were laying not even a few meters apart. But she was still scared of meeting Kirito. Without going to the meeting place, she would go back to Sylvain, and after saying goodbye to several close friends, she would put «Lyfa» in eternal sleep, she thought. Someday the pain would fade, until that time.

Determined, Lyfa looked up and saw Recon's face. She was startled and unintentionally leaned back.

"Wh... what!?"

Recon's face flushed as red as a tomato, his eyes wide open, his mouth opened and shut with nothing coming out. For a moment, she forgot they were in a town, she wondered whether water-attribute suffocation magic was used. At that time, Recon suddenly moved at terrific speed, grabbing her hands then placing them on his chest.

"What-what's wrong!?"

"Lyfa-chan!"

The nearby players turn toward them after hearing his loud voice. He craned his neck, and continued while moving as close as possible to Lyfa who was leaning back to her limit.

"Ly, Lyfa-chan you should not cry! If you are not always smiling, you are not Lyfa-chan! I, I will always be by your side... Either here or in the real word, I will never leave you alone... I, I, I love you Lyfa-chan...Suguha-chan!"

After rattling on like a broken faucet, he didn't wait for Lyfa to answer, but moved his face forward. There was a strange shine from those usually timid eyes, his lips expanding under a swollen nose as he chased Lyfa.

"Ah, that, wai..."

From ambush to surprise attack was Recon's speciality, Lyfa was surprised by the unexpected words and actions, and her body went stiff. As if regarding her silence as consent, Recon was leaning as if to cover Lyfa, and continued approaching.

"Hey... wait..."

Feeling Recon breathe on her face, Lyfa finally recovered from her stunned state, and clenched her left fist.

"Wait... I said!!"

While shouting, she twisted her body and struck Recon's solar plexus with a full strength short blow.

"Guhoo!!"

Since this was inside a city, there's no direct damage but the knock-back effect still worked, Recon was lifted up about one meter before being dropped back down onto the bench. He raised his voice in agony while holding his abdomen with both hands.

"Ugugugguuuu.. H, how cruel, Lyfa-chan!!"

"What!! Suddenly saying something so stupid!"

Lyfa felt her face became hot and stood up. Her face blazing like dragon breath with a combination of anger and embarrassment as she realized her lips had nearly been stolen. For now, she lifted Recon up by his collar and punched him several more times with her right fist.

"Uge! Ugee! S, sorry, I'm sorry!!"

Recon rolled off the bench, and sat on the ground holding himself up with his right hand while shaking his head. Lyfa released her offensive stance,sat down cross-legged on the bench and bowed her head.

"Oh.... How strange... After that, I thought all that was left was if I had the courage to confess or not..."

"...Why you..."

Lyfa was amazed, and honestly said in a becoming tone.

"...Are really stupid. "

"Ugu..."

Looking at Recon's wounded face, which looked like a puppy that had been scolded, Lyfa broke into amazed laughter. With a mixture of sigh and laughter, Lyfa felt like something else came out with them. At the same time, she felt the depths of her chest become lighter.

I guess I was just swallowing everything up till now, she thought. Afraid that she would be hurt, she had clenched her teeth and borne it. Because of that, she was overwhelmed by a flood of emotions, and ended up hurting her loved one.

She might have been too late— But at least at the end she wanted to be honest. Thinking that, Lyfa's shoulders relaxed, looking at the sky, and said:

"—But I don't hate this side of you."

"What!? Really, is that the truth!?"

Recon jumped back onto the bench, and tried to grab her hand, not learning his lesson.

"Don't get carried away!"

Pulling back her hand, Lyfa rose into the sky.

"—Once in a while, I'll try to learn from you. Wait here a while. —If you follow me, this time it will be more than that!"

Lyfa thrust her right fist with a pow toward Recon's face, then opened it and waved, and reversed her direction. She beat her wings strongly, flying with abandon toward the World Tree.

Flying around the huge World Tree for a few minutes, a vast terrace came into view below. It seemed that space was often used for a flea market and occasionally guild events, but today it was deserted. The north side of Aarun doesn't hold any buildings with great architecture, so there weren't any tourists in sight.

The black shadow of a person stood out on the bare pavement in the center of the terrace. With sharp gray wings, and a huge sword strapped to his back.

Lyfa took a deep breath and landed in front of him with grim determination.

"...Hi."

Kirito saw her then with a slightly tense but the usual casual smile, greeted her briefly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Lyfa also replied with a smile. Silence lasted for a while. Only the sound of the wind passed between the two.

"Sugu...."

Kirito finally opened his mouth. A serious look in his eyes. But Lyfa gently raised her hand and interrupted him. She beat her wings once, moving back a step.

"Onii-chan, let's have a match. A continuation of that day."

Lyfa reached for her katana while she spoke, Kirito stared, eyes slightly wide. His mouth moved, as if to say something, but then stopped.

Kirito just looked at her with the black eyes which were the same as in reality, then several seconds later, nodded. He also started beating his wings, putting some distance between them.

"—All right. Now there is no handicap this time."

Kirito replied with a smile, moving his hand to the sword on his back.

They drew their swords at the same time. The cool metallic sound of the two swords being drawn overlapping. Lyfa held her katana in her favorite middle stance, staring straight at Kirito. Kirito crouched down, in a low stance with his sword skimming the ground. In the same way as that day.

"You don't need to stop just before hitting. —Let's go!!"

Saying so, she kicked off the ground at the same time.

While in the instance that their distance shortened, Lyfa thought— is that so. That day, when they sparred, she had thought Kazuto's stance was unreasonable, but it was something polished in the virtual world. Kazuto had gained all his experience in the two years of fighting with real swords at the risk of his life.

She seriously felt she wanted to understand that time for the first time. In that hated world, with the game of death, what he saw, what he thought, and how he lived, she wanted to know.

Lyfa held her sword high, cutting straight down. In Sylvian, it was said Lyfa's attack was unavoidable, but Kirito seemed to move like the the flow of air and just shifted slightly, dodging it. Right after, the large sword immediately jumped in with a twist. She pulled back her katana and blocked it, but both arms were stunned by the heavy impact.

They both used the weapon rebound to kick off the ground, beating their wings. They both rose quickly in a double helix, their swords clashed when they met. Explosion-like light and sound effects roared through the air, shaking the world.

Lyfa could not help but watch Kirito's movements with admiration, both as a kendo champion and a fairy swordswoman. There was not a trace of excess movement, like a beautiful dance of continuous attack and defense.

While in sync with his rhythm, and continuing to swing her sword, Lyfa felt that she was above her experienced limits. Thinking back, in all of the duels she had participated in this world, not once had she felt this kind of satisfaction. Lyfa had lost fights before, all of which were from weapon extra attacks and spells, but she had not lost to pure sword play even once.

The bored fencer was now finally rejoicing at facing the person she loved more than anyone else. She thought that even if their hearts didn't

intersect again, that moment would be enough. Lyfa was unaware that tears were forming in the corners of her eyes.

Like many times during the intense fight when their swords crossed, Lyfa was pushed back, this time she added her wings to it and put a great distance between them through the air. Wings spread, hovering in one place, sword held as high as she could.

This shall be the final blow, Lyfa expressed this feeling to Kirito. He went into motion, his sword held far back behind his body.

For a moment, the silence was like the calm surface of the water.

Tears streamed down Lyfa's face, falling as droplets, spreading ripples in silence. The two people moved at the same time.

Her flight burned, scorching the air as Lyfa moved. Her katana drew an arc of dazzling light. In front of her, she saw Kirito using the same dash. White light sparkled from his sword as it tore through the sky.

With her katana held above her head— she opened her hands.

The sword which lost its master became an arrow of light and flew high in the sky. Lyfa ignored it and spread her arms, ready to receive Kirito's sword.

Doing just this would not satisfy Kirito / Kazuto. However, because her stupid words hurt him, Lyfa / Suguha could think of no other way to apologize.

At least, I would offer this body which was another me to his sword, Lyfa thought.

Arms wide open, eyes half closed, Lyfa waited for that moment.

However— the white light gradually melted into view, Kirito came flying, but his hands too had no sword.

"...!?"

Lyfa opened her eyes in surprise. At the edge of her vision, she saw Kirito's large sword spinning away, just like her sword. At the same time Lyfa released her sword, Kirito had also thrown away his sword.

Why—? She didn't even have time to think as they met in mid-air. Similarly he was stretching out his arms, they collided face-to-face, and the shock stopped her breath as she clung to him unconsciously.

That did not use up their inertia energy, as the two became one, they spun in the air. Blue sky and the huge tree crossing their vision as they went round and round.

"Why—?"

Lyfa managed to say just that. From ultra close-range Kirito stared at her as he spoke at the same time.

"Why—?"

Silent, eyes still meeting, the two continued on due to the inertia in the air of ALfheim. After a while, Kirito spread his wings, stopping their spin and controlling their position before opening his mouth.

"I— wanted to apologize to Sugu— But... I couldn't find the words... I thought at least I would accept your sword..."

Suddenly, Lyfa felt Kirito's arms holding her got tighter.

"I am sorry... Sugu. After I had finally returned.. I, didn't truly look at you. I was obsessed with my problems... I couldn't hear what you said. Sorry..."

Lyfa's tears overflowed as those words entered her ears.

"I... I am more..."

'More than that' didn't become words. Burying her face in Kirito's chest, she loudly cried.

It seemed to take an eternity for the two to slowly land on the grass. Lyfa sobbed the whole time, Kirito gently patting her head, and a few minutes later, began speaking in a gentle voice.

"I... in truth, still have not come back from that world. I'm not finished yet. My reality can't start until she opens her eyes... So, for now, I'm still not sure how to work things out with Sugu..."

"...Ok. "

Lyfa gently nodded her head, and whispered.

"I, will be waiting. For the time that onii-chan truly comes back home. ...So, I will help. Explain to me, about that person... Why, you came to this world..."

Chapter 8

After struggling to collect the two swords that went flying, Kirito and Lyfa landed in front of the two statues that guarded the gate. Recon, who unexpectedly seemed to have been waiting quietly, rushed up. Seeing the black-clad Spriggan beside her, his expression changed and he turned toward her while rubbing his neck.

"Well... H-How did it turn out?"

Lyfa replied while smiling sweetly:

"We're going to attack the World Tree. Him, you, and me; the three of us."

"I-I see... Hey... What!?"

Lyfa clapped a hand to Recon's shoulder as his face turned pale and he backed away, saying 'Let's work hard', then turned to look up at the huge stone door. Standing between the two statues Lyfa realized it seemed to radiate chill air, as if forbidding entrance to those who wished it.

They talked about attacking it, but to tell the truth after seeing someone with Kirito's power getting so terribly beaten by the guardian knights, an increase of only two people would not change the outcome much. She took a quick glance at Kirito beside her— With a severe expression, his lips closed.

Kirito looked up, seeming to have thought of something.

"Yui, are you there?"

Before his words had finished, light particles in the air began to build-up and the familiar cute little pixie appeared. Hands on her hips, she was pouting in indignation. "Oh, too slow! If papa doesn't call for me, I can't come out!"

"My bad, my bad. I was a bit busy."

With a bitter smile Kirito held out his left hand and the pixie sat on it demurely. Recon craned his neck at a terrible speed to look at the pixie, as if he wanted to devour her.

"Wow, th-this is a private pixie!? This is the first time I've seen one!! Oh, incredible, so cute!!"

Hearing this, Yui's eyes went wide and she backed away.

"Wh, what is this person?!"

"Hey, you're scaring her."

Lyfa grabbed Recon's ear and pulled him away from Yui.

"Don't mind this fellow."

"...A, ah."

Kirito stood confused by the scene in front of him. He blinked his eyes two or three times, then looked at Yui again.

"—Well, did you learn anything from that battle?"

"Yes."

Yui wore an earnest expression on her pretty face as she nodded.

"Those guardian monsters, while their health and strength wasn't that high, their spawning pattern was abnormal. The spawning speed increases proportional to the proximity to the inner gate and when you actually get to the gate they would spawn at a rate of twelve per second. That is... It is set at a degree of difficulty that is impossible to capture..."

"Hmm."

Kirito frowned, and nodded in agreement.

"I didn't notice because the individual guardians were not all that strong, but if you view them all as one entity they're an absolutely invincible boss. It's designed to fan the challenger's flame, to keep their interest till the last moment then pull the flag completely away. It's very tricky..."

"But if you think about it, papa's extraordinary skill proficiency is the same. With that fierce power a momentary breakthrough might be possible."

"....."

Kirito was silent in thought for a while, then he lifted his head and stared at Lyfa.

"...I'm sorry. For one more time, can you help me with my selfish request? Though I understand this might be impossible, I would like to find more

people or look for another way. But... my gut tells me something unpleasant will happen soon. I'm running out of time..."

Lyfa heard that and for a moment thought of sending a message to the Sylph lord's mansion in the capital, Sylvain, asking Sakuya if she could send high level players to come to their aid.

But right after, Lyfa bit her lip as she gave up on that idea. Her mind went back to that morning, in Jötunheimr. Remembering the incident with the Undine team brought her back to her senses. They gave priority to efficiency and safety, and they hunted the non-resisting evil-god with no consideration for Lyfa's appeal.

Of course, Sakuya was a friend and wouldn't think the same way as the Undines. But Sakuya was a leader who assumed serious responsibility. In certain situations she would have to let common-sense decisions concerning the whole race override her personal feelings. Even though she would challenge the World Tree one day, it would only be after taking the time necessary to make full preparations. If Sakuya heard Lyfa's personal request for aid, she probably wouldn't come knowing it would mean the total annihilation of her troops.

After a short period of silence Lyfa raised her face with a bright tone and said:

"OK. Let's do our best. I'll do anything within my power... also, this guy too."

"Eh, what..."

Making that sound, Lyfa elbowed Recon, his usual troubled brows were furrowed to their limit. Then saying "Lyfa-chan and I are the same, body and mind", and other things, then finally nodded in agreement.

The stone gate opened with a low rumbling that sounded like it came from the bottom of the abyss and a deep, eerie atmosphere flowed out from the other side of it, which made Lyfa lightly flap her wings. Earlier when she flew in to help Kirito, she didn't notice the overwhelming atmosphere, but now facing the stone gates, she felt the strong psychological pressure.

However, her heart was unusually calm.

Now it felt like she was in a storm. Whether the real world or the virtual world, everything was changing with a flowing and crackling sound. She

didn't know where she was going in this torrent; all she could do was aim for the light in the distance.

Following Kirito, Lyfa and Recon pulled out their swords. Including Yui, all four pairs of eyes met and they all raised their wings together.

"...Here we go!"

At Kirito's shout they all kicked off the ground, plunging into the dome.

As decided earlier, Kirito began aiming for the gate and was at the center of the dome severely accelerating. Lyfa and Recon kept near the ground and began to chant healing spells.

From the emission of the light in the canopy white giants formed from the viscous liquid dripping down. They rushed at Kirito with a strange, courageous shout. As the guardian knight vanguard and the comparatively small Kirito met, a flash of light and an explosion roared through the dome.

Several giants got cut apart in one slash and scattered in all directions. Seeing such a scenario, Recon whispered beside her.

"...Amazing."

It was certainly a terrifying level of sword strength. However, witnessing the scene of Kirito fighting such massive numbers of monsters sent chills running down her spine.

There were just too many enemies. The huge number of guardian knights descending from the mesh-like canopy was a situation beyond game balance. Even in the worst underworld dungeon, Jötunheimr, the monsters spawning rate was much more moderate than this.

The guardian knights grouped together tightly, sending out undulating bands to attack Kirito. A series of flashes occurred above and every time, the body of a knight scattered light dancing like snow. However, every time one was destroyed three more would take its place.

By the time Kirito was half way to the door, his HP had decreased by only ten percent . Lyfa and Recon released the healing magic they had prepared and placed in a standby state. Kirito's body was wrapped in a blue light and his health was restored.

—But.

A terrible thing happened at the same time.

A group of low-flying guardian knights turned toward Lyfa and Recon with a queer cry.

"Ua..."

Recon made an anxious sound.

Lyfa felt that behind those mirror masks the guardian knights were focused on them. She subconsciously clamped her teeth together tightly.

In order to avoid being targeted Lyfa and Recon were to use magic only to heal Kirito. Generally, monsters only attack players who enter their detection range. That is, they don't attack the long-range players if they don't use bows or attack magic.

However, it seems that the guardian knights are different than the monsters in the outside world, they use algorithms with ill intent as well. If they react to support magic from far away then using an orthodox kind of formation like attackers at the vanguard and healers at the rear is useless.

'That group of five or six knights, turn away!' Lyfa's wish was empty, they started beating their four wings and the knights dove. Each of them held a sword easily taller than Lyfa in their right hand. Their swords seemed to gleam with a hungry light.

Lyfa cried out to Recon:

"I'll distract them, you continue to heal like this!"

Lyfa rose without waiting for an answer. However, although during battles until now Recon had just listened to Lyfa's orders, this time he said 'Wait,' then held onto her right hand. Surprised, Lyfa turned around to look at him and was struck by his unusually serious expression, even though his voice was tense.

"Lyfa-chan... though I don't completely understand, this is an important battle, right?"

"—Yes. Right now it's probably not just a game."

"...Although there's no way I can match that Spriggan... I'll do something about the guardians..."

As soon he finished Recon kicked off the ground with the flight controller in his hand. While Lyfa was standing there surprised he flew farther ahead, directly into the group of guardian knights.

"I-Idiot..."

—He wasn't a capable opponent, Lyfa thought, but she knew she couldn't catch up with him anymore. Looking to the side, Kirito's full HP had once again started to decrease. Lyfa was forced to start casting a recovery spell. Even as she quickly cast her spell, Lyfa uneasily continued to watch Recon from behind.

Recon unleashed the wide area wind attribute magic that he had prepared during his flight to attack the guardian knights. Many green blades spread out in a fan shape and attacked the knights, ripping into them. The knights HP wasn't reduced much, but instead all of them targeted Recon.

The white giants issued a distorted howl as they confronted the little green boy. Recon flew around the dangerous giants' swords, as he moved like a leaf at the mercy of the wind, and came out behind them. The knights quickly turned, following him.

Lyfa completed her spell and the light of a healing spell wrapped around Kirito. Several guardian knights reacted and began to descend. Those knights joined the group chasing Recon, causing it to double in size.

Despite not being good at aerial combat, Recon was dodging the swords rushing at him with amazing concentration. He occasionally received an attack and his HP gradually began to decrease, but there were no fatal injuries.

"...Recon..."

Recon's flight looked desperate and Lyfa could not help but feel kind of touched, but she knew Recon couldn't last forever. Every time she cast a healing spell on Kirito, a new group of knights descended, increasing the number gathered around Recon.

Finally, the guardian knights chasing Recon divided into two teams. They appeared to be trying to sandwich him. One of the many sword tips that fell like rain caught Recon on the back knocking him away.

"Recon, that's enough! Escape outside!!"

Lyfa couldn't watch any longer and cried out. Once a player had evacuated the area, he could no longer pass through the door again while there was still a battle going on inside. She decided that she would endure to her limit, then fly up while chanting a healing spell.

But before that, Recon turned and looked at her. Recon's face had a determined smile. Seeing that, Lyfa stopped opening her wings.

Recon began to chant a new spell while receiving multiple sword attacks. His body was quickly surrounded by a dark purple light effect.

"...!?"

Noticing that it was a darkness attribute magic spell, Lyfa gasped. A complicated magic circle unfolded instantly. Judging from its size, it was a considerably high-ranked incantation. Since it's rare to see darkness magic in Sylph territory, Lyfa didn't know what kind of effect it had.

The magic circle became gigantic in a moment, turning on its axis while wrapping around the knights that flocked toward it. The complex pattern of light condensed in an instant— then everything was hit with a terrible flash.

"Ah...!!"

Lyfa was blinded by the flash and instinctively turned her face away. An explosion that sounded as though it was going to crush heaven and earth occurred, violently shaking the entire dome.

It took a full second to recover from that blinding white scene. Lyfa stared desperately toward the blast center while squeezing her hands. She was so surprised that she was lost for words. The guardian knights that had clustered around Recon were annihilated. The only trace of them was the faint purple afterglow hanging in the air.

The power was terrifying. There aren't any such powerful area attack incantations in either the Wind or Fire attributes. 'That guy Recon, when did he learn such a useful hidden skill?' Lyfa was crying both from joy and surprise. If such an attack was used several more times then it would be possible to break through the gate. Lyfa was going to heal Recon for now and moved her hand— but she again froze in place.

In the aftermath of the explosion Recon's small figure wasn't there. Instead, a lone Remain Light floated in the air.

"—Self-Destruction Magic...?"

Lyfa whispered in dismay. That's right— She remembered hearing about this kind of dark magic long ago. However, it had a death-penalty several times worse than that of a normal death, so it can be said to be a taboo incantation.

Lyfa shut her eyes tightly, at a loss for words for a few seconds. Despite being a mere game; the experience, time, and effort Recon put into it made that a genuine sacrifice. From here on out giving up was not an option. She opened her eyes with determination while looking up. Then—

As she saw the scene in front of her, she felt the strength leave her legs.

The top of the dome was so full of white that she couldn't see it at all.

Kirito was the small black speck in the center. After each swing of his sword, bodies fell. It was like poking a vast sand dune with a needle. The holes in the wall of white guardian knights' flesh that Kirito made were instantly refilled, completely blocking him.

"Uooooo!!"

Kirito fought like a demon and roared like he was coughing up blood, his cries of defiance faintly reaching Lyfa's ears.

"...It's impossible onii-chan... something like this..."

To be honest, the idea that someone's soul was trapped in this world, even if Kirito told her, was something she still couldn't quite believe. This was a game, a virtual world meant to be enjoyed. She couldn't help feeling some resistance to the story that linked this world to the nightmarish «SAO World».

However, Lyfa felt for the first time that she had seen a «Malicious System». The virtual game world had a fair balance, but this place was full of killing intent against players. Like a huge death scythe being swung around— that kind of feeling. It was God's intention to kill. No one may resist.

Suddenly a low, distorted, curse like sound reverberated in the dome.

A section of the guardian knights stopped moving, their left hands reaching forward as they chanted spells. That was the spell that sealed Kirito's movement the first time he came here. When it hit, it temporarily stunned, leaving the victim open to sword attacks.

Expecting to see the scene where Kirito was skewered by countless blades, Lyfa froze.

It was at that moment...

Suddenly, from behind came a surge, no, a tsunami of sound that hit Lyfa's withered wings.

"Wh...!?"

Lyfa hurriedly turned around to see— In close formation they came through the open door dressed in shiny green new armor. It was the soldiers of Sylph.

One look showed her that their equipment was ancient weapon class. The large player group, fully dressed in similar shiny new outfits, rushed past Lyfa like the spring wind and flew toward the canopy. There were at least 50 of them.

While awestruck Lyfa focused her attention on them, and one by one name cursors appeared. She could not see their faces because of the visors, but the names displayed were all those of elite players from the Sylph territory. The guardian knights heard the heroic roar of the crowd, suspended their spells aimed for Kirito, and began to move.

A shudder of fear and exhilaration ran up Lyfa's back. However, they were not the only group joining to capture the dome.

Several seconds after the last of the elite Sylvain force passed through the great door, another battle cry resounded. They overlapped, mixing into behemoth-like roars, like that of distant thunder.

The new force that rushed in was considerably smaller than the Sylvain Force. Lyfa estimated there were around ten. However, each member of that cavalry was extraordinarily large.

"Flying Dragons...!"

Lyfa shouted in surprise. From head to tail, they were several times larger than a player and covered with iron-gray scales. As proof that they were not wild monsters, the dragons' forehead, chest, and the protruding edges of their very long wings were equipped with shiny metal armor.

From both sides of the dragon forehead armor reins made of silver chains extended, held firmly by the players straddling the saddles on their backs.

The riders were also fortified with brand new armor, triangular ears protruding from both sides of their heads, from the bottom of their back armor a tail that couldn't be overlooked.

They were without a doubt the Cait Sith's final weapon, the Dragon Knights. They were used as a last resort. The legendary warriors kept in absolute secrecy, never even seen in screenshots, and now, they were flying in front of Lyfa's eyes.

Caught in the euphoria, with her blood boiling, Lyfa stood there with her wings spread taut. Suddenly, she heard someone call out from behind her:

"Sorry we're late."

She quickly turned around and standing there was the figure of the Sylph Lord, Sakuya, wearing high heeled clogs and dressed casually. Sidling up next to her was Alicia Rue, Lord of the Cait Siths, who said while twitching her ears:

"Sorry, the Leprechaun smiths had to forge the number of required dragon armor, so it was finished just a bit ago. Even with the money the Spriggan gave us, our treasury, as well as the Sylphs', is now empty!"

"In other words, both races will go bankrupt if we are annihilated here."

Sakuya laughed cooly with crossed arms.

—They came. The two of them, despite the risk of losing their status as lords, they quickly came. The combined forces of these two races, overcoming the scramble for resources which was the essence of MMORPG games, throwing all calculations of risk to the winds, would surely work effectively to exceed the expectations of the GMs.

"...Thank you ...Thank you, both of you."

Lyfa could only say those words with her trembling voice. Sure enough, in this world there were things more important than rules, and manners, and common sense— that thought filled her heart, and she was not able to say anything else.

Although the two lords replied in different voices they had the same tone as they said, 'We're now even', then glared at the canopy with a stern expression. Sakuya snapped the fan in her right hand.

"Well— We'll go too!"

Seeing the wall of white guardian knights send out groups to attack the front Sylph players, Lyfa firmly nodded her head, and the three kicked off the ground. Kirito was in the center of the dome engaged in fierce battle, but he seemed to have noticed the arrival of reinforcements and stopped trying to break through by himself, leaving some room between him and the knight wall.

Gracefully soaring toward the central part of the Dome, Alicia Rue held up her right hand and cried out in a lovely, carrying voice.

"Dragon Corps! Prepare the Breath attack!"

The ten members of the Dragon Knight cavalry hovered in a large circle around the three, including Lyfa. With their wings spread and their necks bent in an S-shape, she could see an orange light behind their teeth.

Next, Sakuya quickly raised the folded red fan.

"Sylph team, prepare for the special attack!"

Arranged in a dense square, the Sylph forces held out their swords with their right hands above their heads. Emerald green lightning wrapped around their swords like a filigree.

The guardian knights looked like a swarm of white worms with so many assembled and issuing queer jarring cries as they approached. Alicia Rue bit her lips with her long fang, then waiting until the guardian knights approached the limit, waved her right hand, raised her voice, and shouted.

"Fire Breath, attack!"

Then all of the breath the ten dragons accumulated was released in a conflagration of fire. Crimson red lines of fire flew from their mouths, leaving a trail in the air. Ten pillars of fire struck the guardian knights surrounding Kirito and the Sylph soldiers.

Dazzling light lit up the whole dome. Moments afterward, continuous fireballs exploded creating a huge wall of flame. A terrible explosive sound shook the world. The remains of the guardian knights were blown in all directions, leaving white flames burning out.

But there seemed to be an infinite number of guardians, new groups stretching from the wall of flesh, forcibly breaking through the blazing hellfire. First, as if wanting to swallow Kirito, who was at the front, it greatly opened its mouth, looking like a liquid spreading out.

When the white mass was on the verge of flooding, Sakuya sharply swung her fan downward, shouting:

"Fenrir Storm, release!!"

The Sylph force sharply thrust their long swords in perfect order. From each of the fifty swords a dazzling green bolt of lightning gushed out and cut through the air in a zigzag fashion, penetrating deeply into the group of guardian knights.

Again the world was dyed white by the brilliant flash of light. This time no explosion occurred, instead thick lightning ran freely, guardian knights caught in that jaw were blown apart into tiny pieces.

After the second large group was crushed, the central portion of the wall of guardian knights sank down. However, like the surface of a liquid, the hole made in that wall was quickly filled in from the sides.

It was 'now or never', Lyfa was convinced. She instantly unsheathed her katana and kicked into the air to rush forward. The lords seemed to have made the same decision. Sakuya's voice rang through the air like a whip.

"All troops, charge!"

It was certainly the biggest battle that had ever occurred in that world. From behind came the intermittent release of Flame Breath, guardian knights were burned to death and continued to fall one by one. The warhead formation used by the Sylphs cut down the flocking giants with their powerful swords, drilling a vast hole into the wall of meat.

At the tip of the warhead was the little black Spriggan. His equipment grade was way weaker than the Sylph warriors, but with his sword moving beyond god-like speed, anything that his sword touched was instantly cut and blown apart.

Lyfa flew through a gap that the Sylph warriors opened, immediately reaching behind Kirito. After blocking the sword of a guardian knight that was going to attack Kirito's back Lyfa buried her katana in its mirror mask. Holding her katana while turning, the neck of the knight flew away from its body, and the body burned with a white flame.

Kirito turned to Lyfa, and said while moving only his lips.

"Sugu, I leave my back to you."

"Count on me!!"

She met his eyes and responded wordlessly, then put her back against his back. The two of them turned round and round, cutting down the guardian knights that continuously appeared in front of them.

One-on-one, the giant knights shouldn't be that easy for her to kill. However, as she stuck to his back and matched his speed, Lyfa felt as though the knights became slower and slower. No— Maybe her nervous

system accelerated? It had happened in kendo matches before, Lyfa was enveloped by the sense that she could grasp everything going on around her.

It felt as though she and Kirito had become one being. With their nervous system directly connected, the pale electronic pulses flowing from one to the other. Without looking, she knew how Kirito was moving behind her. While his sword cut into a guardian knight's neck, while turning, Lyfa struck high into the same knight's neck and finished it off. On another knight's mask that Lyfa damaged, Kirito struck the same place Lyfa had just hit, cutting deeply.

Kirito, Lyfa, the Sylph warriors, and the dragoon brigade moved like a single white-hot entity, continuing to touch and melt the wall of guardian knights with no limit, going deeper and deeper. The number of knights was unlimited, but the amount of space in the dome was fixed. As long as they continued to progress, the moment would come sometime.

"Seraaaa!!"

With her spirited shout Lyfa cut a guardian knight in half, it collapsed and disappeared.

Beyond the last few knights, even if only for an instant, she saw the zenith of the dome.

"Oooo!!"

With a shout, Kirito moved from behind Lyfa as a black flash of light rushed toward the gap in the wall of flesh. The last group of guardian knights approached him from all directions while raising a cry of resentment to prevent intrusion. They numbered nearly thirty.

"Kirito-kun!!"

Lyfa instinctively swung her katana and threw it at Kirito's left hand with all her might.

The green blade spun through the air and settled into his hand as though it was sucked there.

"U...oooooo—!!"

With a shout that shook the entire dome, Kirito held the greatsword in his right hand and the katana in his left. They shot out with fearsome speed in a dual attack.

Cutting down from the upper right. Cutting up from the lower left. Two shining swords changed angles slightly and drew a snow-white circle that looked just like the corona of a solar eclipse. The bodies of knights that got caught in his ultra-speed slashing were cut to pieces like paper, spreading out into the surroundings.

This time it was clearly visible beyond the End Frame of the ring of white flame. Entangled like a mesh of tree branches at the center of the canopy of the dome, was a circular gate divided into pieces by a cross. Spanning the trunks of the World Tree, the final gate leading to ALfheim, the castle up at the top of the tree.

The small figure in black continued to fly toward the gate, pulling a tail of light behind him. He arrived. At last.

In front of Lyfa's eyes, the bodies of the guardian knights were quickly and repeatedly piled up and filled any open space in an instant. Sakuya, who noticed that Kirito broke through the defensive line, shouted from the rear:

"Everyone fall back, retreat!"

Evading together with the Sylph team while diving with the support of Fire Breath attacks, Lyfa, for a moment, looked back in the direction of the canopy. She was unable to see Kirito's figure due to the wall of guardians, but reflected in the eye of Lyfa's heart, rose the figure aiming for the place that no one had ever reached, rising higher and higher.

Fly— Go— Go anywhere! Through the giant tree, soar through the sky, to the heart of the world—!

* * *

I thought my mental nerves would burn out, considering the speed I rushed through that final distance.

In front of me was a large circular gate made of four tightly shut parts portrayed by a cross-shaped lithograph. Behind it, she— Asuna, waited. Left behind in that world, along with the other half of my soul.

From behind, the guardian knights' screams resounded, full of anger. They turned around and it seemed as though they were about to pursue me. Then the knights reappeared from the canopy around the gate without even a flash of light and rushed toward me as they caught me in their sights.

However, I was quicker. The gate was already just an arm's length away.

But— But.

"...It won't open...!?"

I unintentionally cried out at the unexpected situation.

The gate wouldn't open. Before, I thought if I just got closer that annoying, large door would open, but it was tightly closed, blocking my path and its cross shaped parts wouldn't budge a bit.

From there on, there was no time to slow down. I was poised with my sword in my right hand at waist level, and hoping to shatter the gate in one blow, rushed toward it, becoming one with my sword.

Just after that I hit the gate with a terrible shock. The tip of my sword struck the stone block, violently spraying intense sparks. But— the surface didn't have a scratch.

"Yui— What is going on!?"

I cried out in confusion. No way, was that not enough? Do we not only have to break through the guardian knights, but need some type of item or flag[7] as well?

About to follow the impulse to swing my sword again, Yui flew out of my pocket with a bell-like ting-a-ling. She gently placed her hands on the stone of the gate.

"Papa."

She turned her head, and quickly said:

"The door isn't locked by a quest flag or otherwise! It is simply this way because of the system administrator."

"Wh—? What do you mean!?"

"In other words... the door is something a player would never be able to open!"

"Wha...."

I was speechless.

This means the grand quest— that the race which climbs the World Tree and reaches the City in the Sky would be reborn as true fairies, was like hanging a carrot in front of a rabbit's nose knowing it would never be able to reach it? Beyond the fact that it exceeds the limits in terms of difficulty, then there's a lock that could never be opened without the key called system authority...?

I felt my body lose all strength. Behind me, the cries of the guardian knights rushed over me like a tsunami. However, the will power that allowed me to grasp my sword again wouldn't spring out anymore.

'- Asuna, I've come so far... just a little further, until I can reach you... That piece of your warmth, was that our last contact...?'

'- No. Wait. That is, that's certainly...'

My eyes went wide. With my left hand, I fumbled in my back pocket. There. A small card. What Yui had said, that it was the system access code...

"Yui— Use this!"

I held the silver card out in front of Yui's eyes. Yui's eyes widened for an instant, then she nodded deeply.

Her small hand brushed against the surface of the card. Several streaks of light flowed from the card into Yui.

"Code copying!"

She cried out, then slammed both palms onto the surface of the gate.

I was dazzled by the bright light and squinted my eyes. Where her hands touched, bright blue lines radiated out, and right after, the gate itself started shining.

"—We will be transferred!! Papa, hold onto my hand!!"

Yui stretched out her right hand and firmly grasped the fingertip of my left hand. The line of light channeled through her body flowed into mine.

Suddenly, the queer voice of the guardian knights echoed from right behind us. Although I braced myself, dozens of large swords hurtled toward me. However, those swords passed through me as though they had totally lost substance. No, I was beginning to become transparent. My body faded and melted into light.

"—!!"

Suddenly, I was pulled forward. Yui and I turned into a torrent of data and were then sucked into the gate, which had changed into a glowing white screen.

My lapse of awareness was over in an instant.

I shook my head a few times trying to throw off the lingering sensation of the transfer while blinking my eyes. This was similar to the use of teleportation crystals in Aincrad, but instead of the familiar bustle of a gate square I was surrounded by complete silence.

I slowly stood up from the posture which I found myself in with one knee on the ground. In front of me was a concerned looking Yui. She was not in the little pixie form anymore, but the original, with the appearance of a girl about ten years old.

"Are you all right, Papa?"

"Yeah... This is...?"

I looked at my surroundings while nodding.

However you put it— It was a very strange place. Totally unlike the new 'game' feel of the excessively elaborate, decorated streets of Sylvain and Aarun. Everything I could see gave a blank impression, there were only white walls with no texture or detail.

I was somewhere in the middle of a passage of some sort. Rather than straight, it gently curved to the right. Looking back, it was similarly curved. It seemed to be a very long curve, or perhaps circular passage.

"...I don't understand, there seems to be no map data for navigating this place..."

Yui said with a puzzled look.

"Do you know where Asuna is?"

When asked, Yui closed her eyes for an instant, then nodded deeply.

"Yes, she's very— very close. Upwards... this way."

Kicking off the floor with her bare feet extending from her white dress, she turned and started running without making a sound. I returned the sword that I still held in my right hand to my back then hurriedly followed. The katana that should have been in my left hand had disappeared. Perhaps, when I was transferred, it had returned to Lyfa, who was the owner of the original system data. If she had not thrown me that sword, I definitely would not have been able to break through the last wall. I closed my eyes for a moment and silently prayed words of gratitude toward the sensation that remained in my left hand.

After following Yui for a few dozen seconds, a square door came into view on the left, the outer wall of the curve. It didn't have a single decoration either.

"It seems to be possible to reach the top from here."

I nodded at her words as she came to a stop and looked around the door— My posture went rigid instantly.

There were two triangular buttons lined up, one pointing up, the other pointing down. It was something I had never seen in this world, but nonetheless, it was very familiar in the real world. I could only think they were the buttons of an elevator.

Suddenly and strangely, with my body wrapped in battle garb and a sword strapped to my back, I frowned feeling out of place. No— It's this place that is strange. If these buttons were as I suspected, then this could no longer be thought of as the game world. Then... What is this place?

But that doubt only crossed my mind for a moment. I am good anywhere. As long as Asuna is there.

I touched the arrow pointing up with no hesitation. Soon, the doors slid open with a pong sound effect, exposing a small box-shaped room beyond. Entering the room with Yui I turned around and sure enough, there was a panel of buttons lined up next to the door. The button

representing the current floor was lit and there seemed to be two more floors above that one. After hesitating slightly I pressed the top button.

The sound effect rang out again. The door closed and I was wrapped in an unmistakable rising sensation.

The elevator soon stopped. Beyond the open door was a curved passage similar to the one we just left. Facing Yui, who was tightly grasping my right hand, I said:

"Is this the right floor?"

"Yes. —Already, just... just around the corner."

While saying so, Yui pulled my hand and began running.

For additional tens of seconds I tried to suppress my frantic heartbeat while running through the passage. We came near a few doors on the inner circumference, but Yui went by without sparing a glance toward them.

Eventually, Yui came to a halt in an empty place.

"...What happened? "

"On the other side of this... a passage..."

Yui stroked the smooth wall on the outer circumference while muttering. Abruptly her hand stopped, and like the time with the gate, blue lines of light zigzagged at right angles while running along the surface of the wall.

Suddenly the thick lines separated a square from the wall, then the interior was annihilated with a banging sound. Inside, the dull and uninteresting passage extended straight ahead after all.

When Yui silently set foot into the passage, she began to run at increasingly higher speed. Seeing the tender look on her face, unable to bear the thought of waiting even one more second, I was convinced that Asuna was close.

Hurry, hurry. I wholeheartedly prayed from the bottom of my heart while advancing earnestly. Before long the passage ended ahead and a door with four corners blocked the way. Yui, without even bothering to stop, extended her left hand and forcefully pushed the door open.

"—!!"

In front of us we could see the huge setting sun.

The infinite sunset sky wrapped around the world. I noticed there was a slightly uncomfortable feeling about the view of this place. This place was set at an extremely high altitude, you can see the gently drawn curve of the horizon. The wind was ringing strongly.

Inevitably, I recalled that moment.

Asuna and I sat side by side watching as the floating castle disappeared, dissolving into the eternal sunset. She raised her voice, her words floating to my ear.

"We will be together forever."

"Ah— Yes. I have returned."

After muttering that, I turned my glance to my feet.

Where once there was a crystal floor, now there was a terribly thick tree branch.

My vision, which had been constricted by the crimson sunset, again widened. Overhead, the tree branched out in all directions, extending dense foliage on all sides, like a pillar that supported the heavens. Below, uncountable branches extended in my vision. Even farther down on the ground, beyond the vast ocean of clouds, I could see a flowing river faintly meandering in green meadows.

That was the top of the World Tree. The place Lyfa... Suguha constantly dreamed of seeing, the top of the world.

However -.

I slowly looked around. There, the trunk of the World Tree stood like a wall stretching on forever as it branched off.

"There is no... City in the Sky..."

I whispered while dumbfounded. It only had some tasteless white passages. Such a thing couldn't be the legendary City in the Sky. To begin with, it was necessary to generate some sort of event to mark the end of a grand quest. After breaking through the gate of the dome was complete I could hear no fanfare.

In other words, it was all an empty gift box. Decorated in wrapping paper and adorned with ribbons that are meant to hide the hollow lie. Speaking of that, what should I say to Lyfa, who dreamed of being reborn as a high-ranking fairy?

"...This is unforgivable..."

I spoke without thinking. Against the person or group who was running this world.

Suddenly, I felt a gentle tug on my right hand. Yui looked up at me with a worried look.

"Ah, that's right. Let's go."

Everything was to rescue Asuna. I came here just for that.

In front of my eyes a big branch of the tree stretched toward the setting sun. In the center of the branch was an artificial path. The road ahead, beyond the treetops standing in the sun— was reflecting golden light. Aiming for that light Yui and I began running.

I desperately suppressed my irritation and a desire that seemed like it would catch fire at any second, and advanced forward on the tree path. My perception accelerated, making an instant seem to stretch on infinitely, such that the instant spanning a few seconds seemed to me to be many minutes.

Passing through an area of dense strangly-shaped leaves, the path continued. Whenever the branch intersected with another one, there would be up and down stairs to go past it. I would just beat my wings once and jump over.

The nature of the shining golden light in question became apparent over time. It was a combination of vertical and horizontal metal bars forming a metal lattice— No, it was a birdcage.

Above the big branch we were running on, another branch ran parallel to it, and from that branch hung the orthodox birdcage. However, it was extraordinarily large. It wouldn't be able to shut in a bird of prey, much less the smaller birds. That's right— It seemed to have another purpose -.

I was reminded of the conversation in Agil's shop, from a memory that seemed so far away it might as well be from ancient times. The five players that had piggybacked to bypass the altitude limit and taken screenshots.

The photos they took portrayed a mysterious girl trapped in a birdcage. Yes, definitely. It was Asuna— Asuna would be in there.

There was a strong conviction in that little hand tightly holding my right hand, pulling me forward. We hurtled so fast we practically glided though the air, then we jumped over the final staircase.

The path carved into the branch suddenly narrowed as it ran below the cage, and then it ended.

I could already see clearly inside the golden birdcage. One big plant and various potted flowers littered the white tile floor. In the center was a big bed with a luxurious canopy. Next to it was a round white table with a tall chair. A girl was sitting in the chair with her hands together on the table and her head bowed with the aura of someone praying.

Long, flowing, straight hair was hanging down her back. She was wearing the same type of dress as Yui but more diaphanous. Thin wings extended elegantly from her back. Everything was illuminated in the brilliant red light of the setting sun.

I couldn't see her face. However, I understood. There was no way I wouldn't know. Like a magnetic force, my soul was drawn to her with a nearly visible flash that sparked between the two of us.

At that moment, the girl— Asuna, quickly lifted her face.

Maybe it's because of my deep yearning, but that beautiful shape already seemed to have been sublimated into a more light-filled concept of familiarity. Sometimes it was a smart beauty, like a sharpened sword. Other times, a mischievous friendly warmth. Her face, that was always beside me during those short but nostalgic days together, was at first filled with pure surprise. Then both of her hands rose to cover her mouth while moisture collected in those big hazel eyes, overflowing to form tears.

Taking the last few steps with a winged jump, I whispered in a voice that did not become sound.

"—Asuna."

Yui cried out at the same time, too.

"Mama... Mama!!"

At the end of the path where it ran into the cage there was a square door made of a dense metal lattice inset with a small metal plate that seemed to be a locking mechanism. Although the door was closed Yui didn't slow down while pulling me. Instead, she stretched out her right hand and held it above her left side. Her hand was enveloped in a blue glow.

Then she waved her hand to the right. At the same time the door quickly blew off as if it was just a metal plate. The door soon became light particles and dispersed, quickly disappearing.

Yui released my hand and with both arms outstretched, cried out again.

"Mama -!!"

She rushed straight through the entrance into the birdcage.

Kicking away her chair, Asuna stood up. She removed her hands from her mouth, and from her lips, a trembling but clear voice issued.

"—Yui-chan!!"

Then Yui kicked off the floor, jumping straight into Asuna's chest. Black hair mixed with chestnut hair and danced in the sky, appearing maroon in the sunset.

Yui and Asuna hugged each other tightly, nuzzling each other's cheeks and calling out once again to make sure.

"Mama...."

"Yui... -chan..."

The tears of the two ran down their faces and disappeared in the light of the setting sun, shining like flames.

I relaxed the force that was propelling me forward and quietly walked to Asuna, stopping a few steps in front of her. Asuna lifted her face, and blinking away her tears, looked at me face to face.

The same as that time, I couldn't move. If I moved any closer and touched her, everything might disappear... Anyway, my current shape is very different from that time. The Spriggan's dark skin and my spiked hairstyle, I had nothing in common with the Kirito of that time. Holding back my tears, I could do nothing but stare at her.

But just like that time, Asuna's lips moved, and called my name.

"—Kirito-kun."

After a moment of silence, my mouth moved and called her name.

"...Asuna."

I took the last two steps forward, arms open. I wrapped her delicate body with mine, holding her tightly to my chest with Yui nestled between us. The nostalgic fragrance drifted around me and her nostalgic warmth soaked into my body.

"...I'm sorry it took me so long."

I muttered in a trembling voice. Asuna looked into my eyes from point-blank range and replied.

"No, I believed in you. I was certain— that you would come to help..."

More words were already unnecessary. Asuna and I closed our eyes and buried our faces in each other's necks. Both of Asuna's hands were behind my back, holding me firmly. A contented sigh from Yui seemed to leak between us.

—This is good enough. I thought.

If this became my last moment I would have no regrets, even as my life burned out. The life that was supposed to have been over with that world, finally concludes here, just for this...

No, that wasn't it. Finally, it starts here. Here, that world of swords and battle would end at last and we would finally set out for the new world named reality, together.

I looked up and said:

"Let's go home. To the real world."

After the embrace I firmly grasped Asuna's hand, and Yui held onto Asuna's other hand. I looked at Yui's face and inquired:

"Yui, is it possible to log Asuna out from here?"

Yui wrinkled her eyebrows for a moment, then shook her head.

"Mama's status is bound by a complex code. A system console is required to unlock it."

"Console..."

Asuna said in a nervous voice, tilting her head.

"I think I saw one on the lowest level of the laboratory... Ah, the laboratory is..."

"You mean in that empty white hallway?"

"Yeah. ...You came through there?"

"Yes."

I nodded my head, Asuna frowned while looking at me, seeming disturbed.

"Did you see anything... strange?"

"No, I never met anyone..."

"...It's possible a subordinate of Sugou was hanging around... Just cut them with your sword!"

"Wha... Sugou!?"

At Asuna's mention of that name, I was surprised but at the same time convinced.

"This is that guy... Sugou's work? To imprison Asuna here."

"Yes. —Not only that, Sugou is doing horrible things here..."

Asuna started to say, practically radiating resentment, but shook her head immediately.

"We'll continue this conversation after we return to the real world. Sugou is not at the company now. We can take this chance to get access to the server and free everybody... Let's go!"

Although there were many things I wanted to ask, my top priority was getting Asuna back to the real world. I nodded and turned around.

Pulling Asuna who was holding Yui's hand, I began to run toward the blown off door at the entrance. Taking two steps, three steps, just as we were about to reach the edge of the cage, at that time.

—Someone was watching us.

Suddenly, I felt an unpleasant sensation sizzling on the back of my neck. It was the exact same feeling I got in SAO when I was being targeted by an orange PKer instead of a monster hidden in the shadows.

I quickly let go of Asuna's hand and grabbed the hilt of my sword. Ready to pull out my sword, I moved my hand slightly. At that moment...

Suddenly, the birdcage was filled with water. It felt like we were wrapped in a dark, highly viscous liquid.

No, that wasn't it. It was possible to breathe, but the air seemed to become abnormally heavy. Although I could move my body, as if we were in a sticky mucus I felt tremendous resistance. My body was heavy. It was painful to stand.

At the same time the light faded from the world. The sunset in the birdcage was blotted out by darkness.

"—What is this!?"

Asuna cried out. Her voice was distorted, as though it was coming from deep underwater.

I tried to keep hold of Asuna and Yui and drew them closer despite the extraordinarily unpleasant feeling, but— I couldn't move my body at all. The air was sticky, moving with a consciousness like vines tying me up.

Finally, the world was shrouded in complete darkness. No, it was a little different. I could see Asuna and Yui in their one piece dresses clearly. But the view of the background seemed to be painted over with a deep black.

I gritted my teeth and moved my right hand. I should have been close to the lattice of the bird cage. I extended my hand, thinking to pull my body from that space— but my hand touched nothing.

It wasn't only an appearance. We had been thrown into a world of darkness, there was no telling where it was.

"Yui—"

'What is the situation', I was about to say. But from Asuna's arms, Yui suddenly arched her back and screamed.

"Eek! Papa... Mama... Watch out! There is something really bad here..."

Before she even finished those words, purple lightning started shining from Yui's body, and with a dazzling flash— Asuna arms were empty.

"Yui!?"

"Yui-chan—!?"

Asuna and I shouted at the same time. But there was no answer.

In the thick and sticky true black darkness, only Asuna and I were left. I reached out desperately, wanting to be nearer to Asuna. Wide-eyed, Asuna reached out anxiously.

However, right before our fingertips were about to touch, we were hit with tremendous gravity.

It was like we were thrown into the bottom of a deep, deep swamp of mucus. I couldn't endure it, the pressure overwhelmed my whole body and I fell to one knee. Asuna fell down at the same time, thrusting both hands at the invisible floor.

Asuna looked at me, mouth moving slightly.

"Kirito... -kun..."

'It's all right, I will protect you no matter what', I was going to reply. At that moment a high-pitched laugh echoed throughout the darkness.

"Hey, what do you think about this magic? It's scheduled to be introduced in the next update, but perhaps the effects are too strong?"

That voice loaded with so much mockery that it couldn't be kept in check, was familiar. The man who, in front of the sleeping Asuna, ridiculed me, calling me hero.

"—Sugou!!"

I shouted as I struggled to stand up.

"No no, in this world, please refrain from calling me by that name. Not even using an honorific when calling your king's name. You may call me the Fairy King, His Majesty, Oberon!!"

His last words jumped up a few octaves, turning into an exclamation. At the same time something struck my head.

Turning my head a little bit, a man was standing next to me. All I could see were the feet, wrapped in boots covering gaudily embroidered tights, which he moved to the left and right on top of my head.

When I lifted my eyes I could see he was wearing long clothes in a poisonous green color, and above that is a face that looked perfectly made. No— It really was an artificial face. Starting at zero with polygon modeling, it was a handsome face distorted by its twisted expression, making it truly ugly. His red lips were hugely distorted, making it look like he was grinning.

Even if his appearance was different, I know this guy was Sugou. The man who confined Asuna's soul in such a place, a man for whom hate just wasn't enough.

"Oberon – no, Sugou!"

Asuna was almost lying on the ground, but she raised her face, shouting courageously.

"The things you have done, I've seen them with my own eyes!! Those terrible deeds— You won't get away with it, never!!"

"Oh? Who is going to stop me? You, or maybe him? Or maybe God? Unfortunately, there is no God in this world. Apart from me, hehe!"

Sugou said with his voice mixing together with that annoying laugh as he stepped down on my head, hard. Unable to endure the pressure from the gravity, I was pushed to the floor.

"Stop this, you coward!!"

Asuna yelled, but Sugou did not lend an ear to her cries. Instead, bending over me, he extracted my sword from the sheathe on my back. Standing up, he held it up with his forefinger then spun it around.

"—Well, Kirigaya-kun, no... I should call you Kirito. I did not think you would actually come here. Is it bravery or stupidity? Since you are in this situation it must be the latter, hehe. I heard that my little bird had escaped from her cage. Thinking that this time she must be punished I hurriedly returned, but what a surprise! It seems a cockroach had gotten lost in the cage! —Come to think of it, there was also that one strange program..."

Sugou paused, and waving his left hand, quickly brought out his menu window. His lips curved while he looked at the luminescent blue screen for a moment, and humming in a nasal tone, he closed the window.

"...It escaped? What was that anyway? In the first place, how did you climb up to this place?"

Knowing that at least Yui hadn't been deleted, I felt slightly relieved and said:

"I flew here, with this pair of wings."

"—Well, alright. I'll understand if I ask the contents of your head directly."

"...What?"

"You didn't think that I would make this kind of place while raving drunk right?"

While bouncing my sword with his finger, Sugou wore a smile that dripped venom.

"With the devoted cooperation of former SAO players, my research into the fundamental operations of thought and memory is already 80% complete. A little more and I will be able to control the soul which no one has ever accomplished. That has always been called the work of god! Besides, I have happily obtained a new experimental body today. It makes me so happy. Looking through your memories, rewriting your emotions!! Just the thought of it makes me tremble!!"

"No way... that, you can do that..."

I whispered while I was still trying to master my disbelief after that far too insane speech. Sugou put his foot on my head again, tapping his toes.

"You learned nothing and connected using Nerve Gear right? Then it puts you in the exact same position as my other experimental bodies. After all, children are stupid. Even a dog remembers what not to do once it gets kicked. "

"That... That kind of thing will not be forgiven, Sugou!!"

Asuna shouted with a bloodless face.

"If you put a hand on Kirito, I'll never forgive you!!"

"Little bird, it is near the day when I'll be able to turn your hatred into absolute obedience with the flip of a switch."

After Sugou said that with an intoxicated expression, he held my sword and caressed the blade with the fingertips of his left hand.

"Well, let's have a fun party before I change your soul! Yeah... finally, I've long been waiting for this moment. Since the best guest has shown up, it's worth waiting till the limit of my patience!!"

Sugou turned around, opening his arms wide.

"Now, I am recording all logs of this space! Show me a good look!!"

"....."

Asuna bit her lip, and staring into my eyes, whispered quickly.

"...Kirito-kun, log out right now. In the real world you can expose Sugou's plot. I will be fine."

"Asuna...!"

I felt torn in two directions for a moment. But immediately nodded and waved my left hand. If there was this much information, it was likely I could get a rescue team without physical evidence. As long as we could control RECTO Progress' ALO server, everything would head toward being solved.

—But. The window did not appear.

"Ahahahahahaha!!"

Sugou bent over, holding his stomach as he convulsed in laughter.

"I told you, this is my world! Nobody can escape from here!!"

Sugou danced around happily, suddenly lifting his left hand. After his fingers manipulated the menu two chains seemed to fall from the sky in the endless darkness with a jangling sound.

There was a jarring metallic sound as they hit the floor. Wide metal rings hung from the end of the chains, Sugou took one of the rings and placed it around Asuna's right wrist with a noisy 'kaching' sound. Then, the chain extending into the darkness was tugged lightly.

"Kya!"

The chain was drawn up suddenly and Asuna's right hand was lifted up high. Her toes were barely touching the floor when the chains stopped.

"You bastard... what are you...!"

I cried out, but Sugou did not even spare me a look while humming a song and taking hold of the other handcuff ring.

"I did have a variety of toys prepared. Well, I will start over here first."

While saying that, the ring was shackled to Asuna's left wrist and the chain was retracted. With the other side drawn up, Asuna was suspended in mid-air with the appearance like she was being hauled up by both hands. Seemingly still under the influence of intense gravity, the curvature of her elegant eyebrows was distorted.

As Sugou stood before Asuna with his arms crossed, he gave her a vulgar whistle.

"How nice, this face can't be made by an NPC woman after all."

"...!"

Asuna glared at Sugou and shut her eyelids tightly with her head bowed. Sugou chuckled, a 'kuku' sound emerging from the back of his throat, as he turned and slowly walked behind Asuna. He took a bunch of her long hair in hand and inhaled, taking a deep breath of its scent.

"Mmm, a good fragrance. It was a struggle to reproduce the scent of the real world's Asuna-kun. I wanted you to appreciate the effort of bringing the analyzer to the hospital room."

"Stop... Sugou!!"

An unbearable anger pierced through my whole body. Red flames ran throughout my nerves, in an instant the pressure holding my body blew away.

"Gu... oh..."

I propped myself up with my right hand and tore my body off the floor. Standing on one knee, I gradually lifted myself using all of the power in my body.

Sugou made a dramatic gesture at his waist with his left hand while shaking his head from side to side. He walked in front of me twisting his mouth.

"My, my, the audience should behave... and stay there grovelling!!"

Standing right beside me, he suddenly kicked both my legs. I lost my support and slammed to the floor.

"Guhah!!"

My lungs were emptied from the impact, involuntarily making that sound. With my hands once again propped on the floor my head looked upwards. Sugou hung a venomous smile across his lips— while holding my sword in his right hand he stabbed me in the back without remorse.

"Gah...!"

The flames coursing through my nerves were extinguished by the sensation of thick metal piercing through my body. The center of my chest was pierced through by the sword, which seemed to be deeply rooted in the floor. Though there was no pain, I was being assaulted by intense discomfort.

"Ki... Kirito-kun!!"

Hearing Asuna's cry, I met her gaze while trying to tell her 'I'm fine'.

However, faster than my voice could come out, Sugou suddenly spoke out to the darkness in the sky above with a booming voice.

"System command! Pain Absorption, change to level 8."

That moment, a sharp cone of pure pain spread through my back, as if I was stabbed.

"G... Guh..."

When a groan leaked out of my mouth, Sugou howled in laughter.

"Kukuku, there's still two more treats for you. The pain will get stronger gradually so look forward to enjoying it. When it gets lower than level 3, I'm afraid it seems you'll still feel the symptoms of shock even after logging out."

With a clap of his hands as if he were saying 'Now then...', he returned to behind Asuna.

"F-... Free Kirito-kun right now, Sugou!"

Asuna cried, but of course, Sugou showed no sign of having heard her.

"You know, I hate brats like that the most. Although he has neither the ability or the background, a noisy insect. Kuku, like insects in the specimen box, they must be pinned and stopped. Besides, you're hardly in the condition to worry about him, are you little bird?"

From behind Asuna, Sugou stretched out his right hand and stroked her cheek with his index finger. Asuna twisted her neck trying to avoid it, but it didn't happen as she wanted due to the severe gravity.

His finger crept about her face and before long moved down to her neck. Asuna's face was distorted in disgust.

"Stop... Sugou!"

I cried out, while desperately trying to push up my body. Asuna gave a resolute smile and with a trembling voice, said:

"—Do not worry, Kirito-kun. I won't be hurt by such a thing."

That moment, a squeaky laughter with a 'kiki' sound came from Sugou.

"It has to be like this, after all. How long do you think your pride will sustain you— 30 minutes? An hour? Perhaps a whole day? Prolong it as long as possible, this pleasure!!"

While shouting, he grabbed the red ribbon at the collar of Asuna's dress with his right hand. As he pulled, the cloth stretched and tore. The thin blood-red ribbon fluttered through the air without a sound and landed on the ground before my eyes.

From the torn dress the pure white skin of her chest was greatly exposed. Asuna's face was distorted in humiliation and her eyes shut so tightly she shook.

Sugou bent back, laughing with a smirk while stretching his right hand out to Asuna's bare skin. His lips opened in the shape of a crescent moon and he stuck out his vivid red tongue. While making a sound of dripping mucus, he licked from below Asuna's cheek up.

"Ku, ku, shall I tell you what I am thinking about?"

Sugou said in a voice tinged with a fevered madness while his tongue was still sticking out near Asuna's ear.

"Once I fully enjoy this place I'll go to your hospital room. If I lock the door and turn off the camera, that room becomes a secret room. You and I, just the two of us. I'll set up a large monitor and run today's recording and enjoy myself with the other you! I'll take my time and go carefully. After all, it is your real body. After taking the purity of your heart here, I'll take the purity of your body there!! So fun, a truly unique experience!!"

Sugou's shrill laugh turned my guts inside out as it echoed in the darkness.

Asuna opened her eyes wide for a moment, her lips courageously pulled tight.

However, the fear she couldn't control collected in the corners of her eyes. As the two tears dripped down her long eyelashes Sugou's tongue licked them up.

"Ah... sweet, so sweet! Come on, cry for me some more!!"

A white-hot rage that could incinerate everything pierced straight through my head, scattering violent sparks through my vision.

"Sugou... you bastard... YOU BASTAAAARD!!"

I screamed, recklessly moving my limbs as I tried to stand up. But the sword through me did not even budge.

I felt tears overflowing from both of my eyes. Crawling like an unsightly insect and struggling, I roared.

"You bastard... I'll kill you!! KILL!! I WILL DEFINITELY KILL YOU!!"

I cried, but all that was drowned out by Sugou's mad-sounding laughter.

Right now, if I could borrow power...

My fingertips scratched at the floor, praying to move even a single millimeter forward.

Right now, if I were granted the power to stand up, any price would be fine. Take away my life, my soul, everything, I would not care. Whether it be a demon or a devil, it did not matter as long as that man was cut down and defeated. As long as Asuna was returned to the place she belonged.

Sugou stroked Asuna's arm and leg with both hands, caressing them. Every move of his hand was probably causing a strong pulse of sensory

stimulation in her. Asuna bit her lips so hard she started bleeding, enduring the humiliation.

With that figure in my vision, I felt my thoughts turning white, cut off by a searing white sensation. The flames of anger and despair consumed me. My remaining thought processes were turned to ash. If my soul became like the color of a lump of dry bones, I would not have to think. There would be no need to think.

If I had a sword, I thought I could do anything. Because I was the hero who stood at the top of 10,000 swordsmen. I defeated the demon king, the hero who saved the world.

The virtual world was merely assembled based on the marketing theory of companies, simply a game. Being caught up in thinking it was another reality, I was deluded into thinking that the strength gained in that world was real strength. Freed from the world of SAO— or expelled, after returning to the real world, was I not disappointed with my meager body of flesh? Somewhere in my heart, did I not yearn to return to that world, the world where I was the strongest hero?

Which is why you, after learning of Asuna's mind being in a new game world, thought you could do something about it with your own power and came blindly. When the thing you truly should have done was to leave it to the adults with power in the real world. After regaining the illusory power once again, overwhelming the other players, was it not to please myself by satisfying my ugly pride?

Then this result— was what I deserved. That's right, you were only using the power granted by someone else, getting excited like an innocent kid. Merely having one ID could not overwhelm something called system administration privileges. Only one thing was certain, regret. If I didn't like it, I had to abandon the thought.

『Running away?』

—Not so, I acknowledged the reality.

『Do you surrender? To the power of the system you have defeated before?』

—It can't be helped. I am a player, that guy is a game master.

『Those are words that defile that battle. Where I was made to recognize that the power of the human will can surpass the system, made to comprehend the possibilities of the future, our battle.』

—Battle? Such a thing is nonsense. Isn't it simply a thing that would increase or decrease numbers?

『You should know that isn't so. Now stand. Stand and take hold of the sword.』

『—STAND, KIRITO-KUN!!』

That voice was like a thundering roar, it tore through my consciousness like lightning.

The senses that had been fading seemed to reconnect in an instant. My eyes opened widely.

"Wu... oh..."

Leaked from my throat in a hoarse voice.

"O.... OOoh..."

I clenched my teeth and put my right hand to the floor, pushing myself to my elbows with a voice that sounded like the cry from a beast near death.

When I tried to lift my body, the sword which had pierced through the middle of my spine hung with an overwhelming pressure.

—I can't stay grovelling miserably under such a thing. This attack with no soul, surrendering to it was unforgivable. The barrage of every blade in that world was more heavy. More painful.

"Wu... Gu, ooh!!"

Together with the short roar, I used all the power of my body and soul to lift myself up. With a dull 'shuit' sound the sword left the floor, slipped out of my back, and rolled to the ground.

Sugou stared with a dumbfounded expression as I staggered to my feet. Soon, he made a displeased face and took his hands away from Asuna's body, shrugging theatrically.

"My my, I thought I had fixed the coordinates of the object, I wonder if it still has a strange bug. When it comes to our management team's incompetence....."

He muttered as he walked toward me. Raising his right fist, he sent it flying to punch my cheek.

I stretched out my left hand, grabbing his fist in midair.

"Oh...?"

I looked into Sugou's surprised eyes, opening my mouth. A set of words echoed in the depths of my mind, I repeated them.

"System Login. ID «Heathcliff». Password....."

The gravity which was wrapped around my body disappeared as soon as I finished reciting the complex series of alphanumeric characters.

"Wha... What!? What is that ID!?"

When Sugou bared his teeth and cried out in surprise, he shook off my hand and flew back a step. He waved his left hand downward and a blue system menu appeared.

Before that guy could even move a finger, a Voice Command emitted from my mouth.

"System command. Supervisor Authority Change. ID «Oberon» to level 1."

In a split second, the window disappeared from under Sugou's hand. He stared with his eyes looking back and forth several times between my face and the empty space where the window was, waving his left hand again in frustration.

However, nothing would happen. The scroll of magic which gave Sugou the power of the Fairy King wouldn't emerge.

"A... An ID of a higher rank than mine...? Unbelievable... This shouldn't be possible... I am the ruler... The creator... The Emperor of this world... God..."

Sugou kept talking in a high-pitched voice that sounded like an audio sample played back at high speed. I spoke while looking at the pretty face collapsed into ugliness.

"That isn't so, right? You stole it. The world. The residents there. A thieving king that dances all alone on his stolen throne."

"Thi... this punk of a kid... me... actually dares to say that to me... I'll make you regret it... I'll take your head off and make it an ornament..."

Sugou thrust a forefinger bent like a hook at me and screamed in a shrill voice.

"System Command!! Object ID «Excaliber» Generate!!"

However, the system was no longer responding to Sugou's voice.

"System Command!! Listen to me you piece of junk!! God... God is commanding you!!" At his screams, I averted my eyes from Sugou. I looked at Asuna who was still hanging off of the ground.

Her radiant dress was ripped and only shreds covered her body, her hair disheveled, and there were streaks of light that were tears on her cheeks. But her eyes had not lost their shine. That strong whip did not break her tenacious spirit.

—It'll be over soon. Wait just a little more.

I whispered in my mind, looking into Asuna's hazel-colored eyes. It was a small motion, but Asuna nodded.

A new flame of anger rose in me when I looked at Asuna's oppressed figure. I looked up slightly and said:

"System Command. Object ID «Excaliber» Generate."

The space before me began to distort when I said that. Minuscule numbers flowed out in a rush to form a single sword. The color and texture were given gradually from the tip down. With a blade giving off a golden gleam, it was a longsword engraved with beautiful decorations. There was no doubt it was the same weapon that had been sealed at the end of the dungeon in Jötunheimr. The strongest sword which was the dream of many players, and it appeared on one command, not a particularly pleasant feeling.

I grabbed the hilt of the sword and threw it to a wide-eyed Sugou. After seeing him catch it in a dangerous manner I gently lifted my left foot.

My sword flew up into the darkness from where it had rolled before when I stepped hard on its pommel. Rotating through the air, it dropped toward my right hand with a flash of its blued steel. With a heavy sound, the sword fell into my hand.

When I had pointed my unwieldy black iron greatsword at Sugou, I said:

"It's time to settle this. The thieving king against the pretend hero... System Command. Pain Absorption to level 0."

"Wha... What...?"

Hearing the command to raise the virtual pain without restriction, the color drained from the cheeks of the Fairy King wielding the golden sword. He edged back one step, two steps.

"Don't try to escape. That man had no hesitation whatsoever in any situation. That— Kayaba Akihiko."

"Ka... Kaya..."

Hearing that name, Sugou's face became extremely warped.

"Kayaba... Heathcliff... so it's you... You're getting in my way again!!"

Waving the sword in his right hand high above his head, he screamed in a voice that would tear metal.

"You died! You bit the dust!! Why should you hinder me even in death!! You were always like this... Always always!! Always making that face like you understood everything... snatching away all the things I wanted by the edge!!"

Sugou shouted, suddenly thrusting his sword towards me before continuing.

"A brat like you... What could you possibly understand!! What it's like to be below him... What it means to compete with him, how could you possibly understand what it's like!?"

"I understand. I became a servant after being defeated by that man too. —But I never thought of becoming like him. Unlike you."

"Brat... This brat... THIS BRAAAAAT!!"

Sugou kicked off the ground with a scream that turned inside out and brandished his sword. As soon as I observed an opening, I cleave down the sword in my right hand and the tip of my sword sliced through the smooth cheek of the Fairy King.

"AAah!!"

Sugou cried as he held his cheek with his left hand and jumped back.

"It... HUUURTS...!"

The scream from the wide-eyed figure only served to further ignite my rage. The thought that Asuna was under this man's oppression for two months was unbearable.

Taking a large step forward, I brought down my sword. Sugou instinctively raised his right hand to block and my sword severed his wrist. The hand and the golden sword being wielded disappeared into the darkness. The sound of it falling somewhere far away echoed clearly.

"AAAAAAaaah!! Hand... My haaaaand!!"

It was a pseudo-electrical signal, but that was why Sugou would be feeling pure pain. Of course, it wasn't enough. There was no way it could be enough.

I swung my sword with brute force at the green robes wrapping Sugou's torso while he was holding onto the stump on his forearm and moaning.

"Guboaaaa!!"

The stomach of the tall, handsome body was dissected apart in two equal halves, rolling to the floor with a severe noise. The lower half was immediately engulfed in rising white flames and collapsed after being burned.

Grabbing Sugou's long wavy blond hair in my left hand, I lifted him up. He continued to scream in a metallic voice out of a quivering mouth that was opening and closing, while tears drained from eyes which were stretched open to the limit.

His figure could only evoke disgust in me. I swung my left hand, throwing his upper torso straight down.

Holding my greatsword with both hands, I took a stance above him. Watching the sword drop, he released a harsh scream -.

"...Uoooo!!"

I brought the sword down with all of my strength. With a noisy 'Gatsutsu' sound, the blade went through Sugou's right eye and exited from the back of his head.

"Gyaaaaaaaaa!"

The unpleasant scream echoing in the darkness was like several thousand broken gears scraping against each other as they turned. The right eye was divided in two on the left and right sides of my sword. Sticky white flame erupted, quickly spreading from the head to the upper body.

He turned ghost-like and kept dissolving, and for the several seconds before completely disappearing Sugou continued crying without stop. The scream slowly faded, and before long, the figure disappeared. Silence returned to the world, and I waved my sword, scattering the white embers.

With a gentle swing of my sword, the two chains binding Asuna shattered and disappeared. I let go of my sword, its job complete. I held Asuna as she slipped to the ground, her body gone limp.

The energy supporting my body also ran out and I slid to one knee on the ground. I looked at Asuna in my hands.

"...Ugh..."

The torrent of helpless feelings changed form and began flowing from my eyes as tears. Tightly holding Asuna's slender body, my face buried in her hair, I cried. I couldn't say anything, I just kept crying.

"—I believed."

Asuna's clear voice shook my ears.

"...Yes, I believed. ...Up until now, from here on. You are my hero... You will always come to help me..."

Gentle hands stroked my hair.

—That's not it. I... I actually had no power...

However, I took a big breath, and said in a trembling voice.

"...I will do my best to be like that. Now, let's go back..."

Waving my left hand, a complex system window emerged, it was really different from normal ones. I intuitively dove into the hierarchy window, stopping when my finger landed on the transfer-related menu.

Staring into Asuna's eyes, I said:

"In the real world it is probably already night. But I will go to your hospital room immediately."

"Yeah, I'll wait. It will be nice to see Kirito-kun first."

Asuna smiled brilliantly. She looked at some far-off place, with crystal clear eyes, and whispered:

"Ah... finally, it ended. I will return... to that world."

"That's right. ...It changed in various ways, you will be surprised."

"Fufu. Let's go to a lot of places and do many things."

"Yeah. —For sure."

I nodded holding tightly to Asuna and moved my right hand. I touched the log out button, with my finger-tip glowing blue waiting for a target, I gently wiped away the tears flowing down Asuna's cheeks.

Then, blue light wrapped around Asuna's white body. Little by little, Asuna became more transparent like crystal. Particles of light came from her fingers and toes, dancing through the air before disappearing.

Until Asuna completely disappeared, I was holding on to her body tightly. Finally, the weight in my arms vanished and I was left alone in the darkness.

For the moment, I remained crouching.

In addition to feeling that everything was over, there was also the feeling of a large amount of progress. Yet this incident caused by Kayaba's fantasy and Sugou's ambition— Is this the so-called ending? Or is it just another big turning point?

I forced myself to stand up somehow with a body that was running out of energy. I looked above in the dazzling darkness extending to the depths of the world, and whispered alone.

"—You're there aren't you, Heathcliff?"

After a moment of silence a rusty voice sounded in my consciousness, the same one as earlier.

『It has been a long time, Kirito-kun. Though for me— the events of that day seem like just yesterday.』

It was different this time, as the voice seemed to reach me from some far-off place.

"—Are you alive?"

With that short question, I heard an answer after the briefest instant of silence.

『You could say that I am, and you could say that I'm not. In a sense, I am— an echo of Kayaba Akihiko's consciousness, an afterimage.』

"As usual, you're a person that says things in a confusing way. I'll express my gratitude for the time being— At any rate, it would have been nicer of you to have come out and helped us earlier."

『.....』

The presence of a wry smile being revealed.

『That was unfortunate, my apologies. The time when the decentralized preservation system connected and awakened my program was just a bit ago— when I had heard your voice. There is no need for thanks.』

"...Why?"

『You and I aren't on friendly enough terms to accept free favors. I need to have compensation of course, naturally.』

This time it was my turn to smile wryly.

"Then tell me what needs to be done."

Then, from the distant darkness, some kind of— silver shining object fell. I reached out and it settled into my hands with a faint sound. It was a small, egg-shaped crystal. Within the crystal a dim light was blinking.

"This is?"

『It is a world seed.』

"—What?"

『When it sprouts, you will understand. I entrust you with the decision of what to do with it afterwards. Deleting it is fine, forgetting it is fine... However, if you have any feelings other than hatred left for that world...』

The voice broke off there. Following a short silence, only a curt farewell descended.

『- Well then, I'll be going. May we meet again some day, Kirito-kun.』

Then suddenly, the presence vanished.

I twisted my head around, dropping the shiny egg into my breast pocket for the meantime. Lost in thought for a while, I lifted my face.

"—Yui, are you here? Are you okay!?"

As soon as I cried out, the world of darkness split open along a straight line.

Orange light quickly shone through, cutting up the dark curtain. The wind blew in at the same time carrying away the darkness. It was so beautiful and dazzling that I had to momentarily close my eyes. I opened them cautiously and found myself back in the birdcage.

In front of me, the huge setting sun was giving off its last light before falling below the horizon. There were no human figures, just the sound of the wind.

"—Yui?"

Calling out once again, light condensed in front of my eyes, and a dark-haired little girl appeared with a crackling pop.

"Papa!!"

With a resonant cry Yui jumped into my chest, hugging my neck tightly.

"You were safe. —Thank goodness..."

"Yes... When it looked like my address was going to be locked all of a sudden, I retreated to the Nerve Gear's local memory. I managed to connect again, but both Mama and Papa were gone... I was worried. —Mama is...?"

"Ah, she returned... to the real world."

"I see... that's great... truly..."

Yui closed her eyes and put her cheek to my chest. I sensed a faint shadow of loneliness from her and gently stroked her long hair.

"—Soon, we'll come see you again. But... I wonder what will become of it, this world..."

After my muttering, Yui grinned and spoke.

"My core program is not part of this place but stored in Papa's Nerve Gear. We'll always be together. —Oh, but it is strange..."

"What's the matter?"

"A rather large file has been transferred to your Nerve Gear's storage.... though it does not seem to be active..."

"Hmm..."

I tilted my head, but put aside the question for now. Rather, there was something else I needed to do no matter what.

"—Well, I'm going. To meet your Mama."

"Yes. Papa— I love you."

Exuding wispy tears, I hugged Yui strongly while stroking her head and waved my right hand.

Just before I pressed the button, I stopped and watched the world dyed in the colors of sunset. This world that was ruled by a false king, what would happen to this world now that he was gone? My heart ached when I thought of Lyfa and the other players who loved this world so deeply.

I gently kissed Yui's cheeks and moved my finger deeply. Radial light spread through my vision, it wrapped my awareness and carried me higher and higher.

I felt a deep sense of exhaustion when I opened my eyes. In front of my eyes was Suguha's face and she was looking at my face with a worried expression. When our eyes met she hurriedly stood up.

"S-, sorry, I entered your room without permission. When you didn't come back for a long while, I became worried..."

Suguha said, with her cheeks slightly flushed as she sat on the edge of my bed. After a little time lag my limbs regained a sense of connection and I forcefully push my upper body up.

"Sorry I was late."

"...is it all over?"

"—Yeah... finished... everything..."

For a moment I stared into space while answering. Being in a dangerous situation in the virtual world and getting captured, but this time imprisoned without being able to be cleared, wasn't something I could tell Suguha. Eventually I would tell her everything, but right now I don't want her to be more worried. This one and only younger sister who had already saved me more times than words could tell.

That one late night in the forest, I met a green-haired girl and my new adventure started— during the whole long journey, she was always with me. She showed me the way, taught me about the scenery and protected me with her sword. If she hadn't introduced me to the two lords and made friends with them, I definitely would not have been able to break through the wall of the guardian knights.

Looking back, I also received the help from a huge number of people. But of course, the most help came from the girl in front of my eyes. When I was Kirito and she was Lyfa, and when I was Kazuto and she was Suguha, she helped and supported me, but at the same time her small shoulders carried a deep anguish.

Once again I stared at Suguha's face, it had both the dazzling activeness of a boy, and a newly sprouted green leaf's evanescence. I reached out a hand and gently patted her head, Suguha gave a small smile of embarrassment.

"Really— Really thank you very much, Sugu. If you weren't here, I wouldn't have been able to do anything."

Suguha's face became even redder and she lowered her head. She fidgeted for a bit, then she made up her mind and rested her cheek against my chest.

"Yeah... I was happy. In onii-chan's world, I was able to help onii-chan."

Suguha whispered with her eyes closed. With my right hand, I gently held her back and gave her a quick squeeze.

After I let go, Suguha looked up at me and said.

"Then... you got her back, right? That person— Asuna-san..."

"Yeah. Finally— She is back at last... Sugu, I....."

"Yes. Go, surely she is waiting for onii-chan."

"Sorry. I'll tell you the details when I get back."

I put a hand on Suguha's head and stood up.

I got dressed in record time, but paused on the porch in my down-jacket. It was completely dark outside. The hands of the antique wall clock which hung in the living room pointed to a time shortly before 9:00 PM. Visiting hours were over long ago, but the situation was the situation. If I told the circumstances at the nurses station, I might be able to get in.

Suguha immediately ran up to me, 'I made this', and handed me a thick sandwich. I accepted it gratefully and bit on it, then opened the patio door and walked down to the yard.

"C, cold..."

I ducked my head when I realized the cold was penetrating my jacket. Suguha looked up at the dark night sky and said.

"Ah... snow."

"Oh..."

Indeed, there were two or three large white snowflakes that came floating down. I hesitated a moment about whether to call a taxi. If I did that though, I would have to wait then walk to the main road to be picked up, so it would be faster to just use my bicycle.

"Be careful. ... Say hello to Asuna for me."

"Yeah. Next time, I'll introduce you properly."

I waved goodbye to Suguha and sitting astride my mountain bike, I started pedaling.

I let my bike run at full speed, and the crazy speed blew the thoughts out of my head as I flew through south Saitama. The snow gradually started falling down harder but it didn't accumulate, and the reduced traffic density was helpful.

I wanted to reach Asuna in the hospital as quickly as possible— But at the same time, I was partly afraid of what I might find. For the past two months, I had visited that room every other day, always tasting bitter disappointment. Wondering if she would become a cold statue like that, I took her hand while she was silently imprisoned in sleep. I kept calling her name even though it never reached her.

Like this, while moving down this road, I even remember the gaps, finding her in the fairy kingdom, defeating the fake king, and freeing her from chains might just be my fantasy.

If I visited her hospital room a few minutes later and Asuna did not wake up.

Her soul was no longer in ALfheim, but she still did not return to reality— Once again, she might have vanished to some unknown place.

It wasn't only the snow hitting my face in the dark night that was causing the terrible chill to run up my back. No, there couldn't be such a thing. The system that governs the world by the name of reality couldn't be that ruthless.

While my tangled thoughts intertwined I continued pedaling. I turned right on the highway into the hills. My deep tread block-tires acted as a shovel to bite and kick into the thin snow on the asphalt, accelerating my bike.

Before long, the shadow of a huge building appeared in front of me. Most of the lights were out, but a blue light flashed from the helipad on the roof like a will-o-the-wisp trying to attract victims to the castle of darkness.

A high iron fence appeared when I finished climbing the hill. I rode along it for tens of seconds longer. I finally reached the front gate, protected by especially tall gateposts.

Because it was a highly specialized medical facility, it didn't accept emergency cases. The gates were already tightly closed and the guard box was unmanned. I rode past the entrance to the main parking lot and entered through the small staff entrance.

I parked my bike at the end of the parking lot. It was too irritating to lock it up so I ran on. In the orange light cast by sodium floodlights I could see the parking lot was completely deserted. The silence was broken only by the snow falling from the sky, painting the world white. I continued running while exhaling clouds of steam with my rough breathing.

Half way across the vast parking lot, as I was about to pass between a tall dark-colored van and a white sedan, at that moment.

I almost collided with the shadow of a person rushing out from behind the van.

"Ah..."

'Excuse me', I was about to say while trying to dodge, something crossed my vision—

Flash, a vivid shine of metal slashed at me.

"—!?"

Right after, heat blossomed on my right arm, just below the elbow. At the same time a lot of white scattered. It wasn't snow flakes. It was fine white feathers. The insulation from my down-jacket.

I staggered back, somehow colliding with the rear of the white sedan and managed to stop.

I could not understand the current situation. While stunned, I looked at the black shadow about two meters away from me. It was a man. He was wearing a suit that was nearly black. He was holding something long, slender, and white in his right hand. It shone dully in the orange light.

A knife. A large survival knife. But, why.

My face froze as I felt the stare of the man in the shadow of the van. He was moving his lips, but what came out was a hoarse whisper.

"You're late, Kirito-kun. What if you make me catch a cold?"

That voice. It was a high-pitched, sticky voice.

"Su... Sugou..."

I was stunned, at the same time I called out his name, the man took a step forward. The sodium lamps illuminated his face.

Compared to a few days ago, his smooth combed hair had become severely disturbed and there were several days worth of beard covering his sharp jaw. His neck-tie was almost completely untied and hung loosely around his neck.

And also— Strange eyes peered out at me from behind metal framed glasses. The reason was apparent at once. Even though his eyes were open as wide as possible, his left eye had dilated adapting to the darkness of night while his right eye was small and contracting. In the World Tree, that was where he was pierced with my sword.

"You did a cruel thing, Kirito-kun."

Sugou said in a rasping voice.

"The sense of pain has not disappeared yet. Well, there are various good medicines, so it does not matter."

His right hand thrust into his suit pocket, grabbed a few capsules and threw them in his mouth. With a Kacha Kacha sound he started chewing, and Sugou took another step toward me. Finally recovering from my shock, I managed to move my dry lips.

"—Sugou, you are already finished. You have gone too far to cover things up. Receive judgement obediently."

"Finished? What? Nothing is over yet. Well, Recto is unusable now. I'll go to America. There are a lot of companies which want my expertise. I have now accumulated a large amount of experimental data. If I use that to complete my study, I will become the true king— true god— this real world's god."

—He's crazy. No, perhaps he had been broken for a long time.

"Before that, there are some issues I have to take care of. First, I will kill you, Kirito-kun."

After he finished talking in a subdued voice without a change in expression, Sugou briskly approached me. The knife in his right hand casually moved toward my eyes.

"...!!"

I kicked off the asphalt with my right foot, trying to avoid it. However, because of the snow under my shoe, I slipped and lost my balance, collapsing on the parking lot. I landed hard on my left side, the breath leaving my body.

Sugou looked down at me with pupils which couldn't seem to focus.

"Hey, stand up."

After that, he kicked me in my thigh with the tip of his expensive shoe. Twice. Thrice. Hot pain ran up my spinal chord, echoing in the back of my head. It also reverberated through my right arm creating a sharp pain. I finally noticed that there was a cut not only in my jacket but also on my arm.

I could not move. I could not make a sound. The survival knife that Sugou was holding— the longer than 20 centimeter blade, the heavy pressure of that murderous tool, made me freeze.

Kill—? Me—? With that knife—?

My fragmented thoughts flowed and disappeared. That thick blade, penetrating my body silently, deadly— As the words showed, taking my life with a fatal wound, I imagined that instant again and again. Besides that, there was nothing I could do.

The pain in my right arm became a dull heat. Several drops of dark liquid dripped from the gap between the cuff of my winter jacket and glove. I began to imagine the blood flowing from my body endlessly. A clear and real image of «death» which wasn't a numerical value in a HP bar.

"Hey, stand up. Just stand up."

Sugou mechanically kicked and stepped on my feet again and again.

"You, what you said to me over there. Don't run away? Don't hesitate? Let's settle this? You said them arrogantly."

I heard him whisper, Sugou's voice filled with the same colors of insanity as I heard in the darkness over there.

"You understand now? A little shit like you with no ability but games, and no true power at all. That's what you call inferior trash. Nevertheless, you thwarted me, this me... Naturally, the punishment for your sins is death. It is impossible for it to be anything other than death."

After speaking in a tone without inflection, Sugou put his left foot on my belly, and changed his center of gravity. From the physical pressure and the mental pressure as he released his madness, I lost my breath.

I watched Sugou's face as he approached, taking shallow, irregular, rapid breaths. While bending, Sugou held the weapon in his right hand high above his head.

Without blinking, he swung it down.

"—gh"

A stiff sound leaked from the back of my throat—

Along with a dull metallic sound, the tip of the knife grazed my cheek and dug into the asphalt at the same time.

"Ah... my right eye is blurry, my aim was off."

Sugou muttered as he raised the knife high again.

The edge of the knife was dazzling in the light of the sodium lamps, and drew an orange line in the darkness.

Maybe it was because he hit the hard road with it, but the knife tip was slightly fragmented. That flaw gave the knife a more realistic physical presence as a weapon. Rather than a polygon weapon, it was made of condensed metal molecules, heavy and cold, and genuine lethal blade.

Everything seemed to slow down. Snow which fell from the dark sky. The mass of air expelled from Sugou's mouth. The knife which was descending toward me. The blinking of the orange light reflected from the serrations carved in the blade.

That reminds me, there was a jagged weapon like that...

A piece of meaningless memory flowed to the surface of my stopped thought.

What was that? It was a dagger type item sold in the middle layers of Aincrad. I think it was called «Sword Breaker». If you parry the enemy's weapon on the saw shaped back portion, there was a slight bonus increasing the chance of destroying their weapon. Because it seemed interesting, I placed the dagger skill in the skill slot and used it for a while, but wasn't satisfied with it due to its low base offensive ability.

The weapon Sugou was holding now was even smaller than that. It couldn't even be called a dagger. No— Such a thing couldn't even be

categorized as a weapon. It was a tool for daily work. It wasn't a thing a swordsman would use to fight.

In the depth of my ears, I heard Sugou's words from a few seconds ago.

True power, possessing nothing of that—

Yes... that's right. It didn't even need to be said. But who are you to be saying you would kill me, Sugou? A master of the knife skills? Martial arts expert?

I looked behind Sugou's glasses, his small eyes seemed to be dyed the color of blood. Excitement. Madness. But they also held something else. Those were the eyes of someone trying to escape. Those were the same eyes that someone who was surrounded by hordes of monsters in a dungeon, falling into a desperate deadly situation, the eyes of someone who swung their sword in a frenzy, trying to intercept reality.

This guy was the same as me. Continuing to chase power, but unable to obtain it, just moving in ugly steps.

"...Die, you bratttt!!"

Sugou's scream pulled my consciousness back from the world moving at slow speed.

I raised my left hand like a magnet and caught Sugou's right wrist as he swung it down. At the same time, I stretched out my right arm and shoved my thumb into the hollow of his throat beside his loose tie.

"Guu!!"

With a grunt, Sugou leaned back. I twisted my body, grabbing Sugou's right hand with both of my hands, and slammed his hand on the frozen asphalt with all my might. His hand came loose with a scream, and the knife rolled away on the road.

Screaming shrilly like a whistle, Sugou jumped toward the knife. I bent my right leg, letting it fly, my shoe's sole impacting on his jaw. I scoop up the knife and used the recoil to stand up.

"Sugou..."

From my throat came a voice that cracked so badly that I could hardly believe it was my own.

Through the glove on my right hand, I felt the presence of the cold, hard knife. It was a poor weapon. Too light, with no reach.

"But it is enough to kill you."

After whispering, I turned to Sugou who was looking up at me with a blank face while sitting on the asphalt, then sprang at him fiercely.

I grabbed his hair and head in my left hand and slammed it into the door of the van. With a dull sound the car's aluminium body was dented, and his glasses flew away. Sugou's mouth opened hugely. Aiming for his throat, I moved my right hand with the knife without hesitation—

"Guu... Uuu...!"

I stopped my arm there, gritting my teeth.

"Iii! Hiii! Iiiii!!"

Sugou was making the same sound as he had in that world just ten minutes or so ago, with that high-pitched scream.

It was natural for this man to die. It was natural that he be judged. It would all be over if I brought down my right hand. It was the settlement. The full victor and the defeated were decided.

However—

I'm no longer a swordsman. That world where everything was determined by the skill of one's sword has already been left far in the past.

"Hiiiiii..."

Suddenly, Sugou's eyes rolled up into his head, exposing the whites. His scream broke off, and his whole body lost strength like a machine cut off from electricity.

Strength also left my hand. Slipping from my hand, the knife rolled onto Sugou's stomach.

I also removed my left hand, and stood up.

I thought that if I had to see that man for even one more second, the impulse to kill would boil out, and I wouldn't be able to resist it again.

I ripped off his tie and rolled him over, and tied both his hands behind his back. I placed the knife on the roof of the van. I whipped my body around, back onto my original path. Then I staggered, step by step, dragging my legs while starting to run across the parking lot.

It took about five minutes to get up the wide steps to the front entrance. I stopped and took a deep breath. I looked down at my body, which I had managed to get control of.

I was in a terrible state, dirtied with snow and sand. The cuts on my left cheek and right arm had apparently stopped bleeding, while still painful.

I stood in front of the automatic doors. However, there was no sign of them opening. I peered through the glass, the main lobby was dimly lit, but a normal light was on behind the receptionist's desk. I looked from side to side. I found a small swinging glass door to the far left, and fortunately, it opened when I pushed it.

Silence filled the building. I crossed the orderly rows of benches that lined the vast lobby.

No one was at the counter, but from deep inside the adjacent nursing station, I heard pleasant chatter. Praying for a decent voice, I opened my mouth.

"Um... Excuse me!"

A few seconds after my voice echoed, a door opened and two nurses in light green uniforms appeared. They both had suspicous expressions on their faces which changed to shock when they got a good look at me.

"—What happened to you!?"

The tall, young nurse with her hair piled on her head exclaimed. Apparently, there seemed to be more bleeding on my face than I thought. I pointed in the direction of the entrance and said:

"I was attacked by a man with a knife in the parking lot. I left him unconscious on the other side of a white sedan."

Tension ran through the two women's faces. The older nurse operated a machine behind the counter, holding a small microphone near her face.

"Guards, please come to the first floor nurse station immediately."

There seems to have been a guard in the middle of patrol nearby, and a man in a deep blue uniform soon appeared with his running footsteps. The man's expression became severe after hearing the nurses' explanation. Speaking into a walkie-talkie, the guard went to the entrance. The younger nurse followed him.

After having looked at the wound on my cheek for a minute, the nurse who remained said:

"You, are the twelfth floor Yuuki-san's family right? Is that your only wound?"

There seemed to be a small misunderstanding, but I nodded without the willpower to correct it.

"I see. I'll call a doctor right away, please wait for me here."

She ran off with a 'pitter-patter' as soon as she said that.

I took a deep breath and looked around. Confirming that no one was nearby, I leaned over the counter and grabbed one of the guest pass cards from inside. I turned to the opposite direction than where the nurse went, to the hospitalization ward which I had passed many times before, and whipped my trembling feet into a run.

The elevator had stopped at the first floor. When I pressed the button, the door opened with a low chime. I leaned against the inside wall and pushed the button for the top floor. Even though the acceleration was slow for a hospital, my knee felt nearly broken from the small extra weight. I desperately held my body up.

After what I felt to be several long seconds, the elevator stopped and the door opened. I fell out of the elevator into the passage.

Asuna's room was only a few tens of meters away, but the distance seemed endless. I supported my body, which was just about to collapse, on the wall and moved forward. After turning left at the L shaped passage— In front of me, I saw a white door.

Step by step, I walked.

Same as that time -.

When I returned to the real world from the end of the virtual world surrounded by sunset, I woke up in another hospital, struggling to walk on

withered legs. In my search for Asuna, there was nothing but to walk. That passage, was connected to this place.

I could finally meet her. The time had come.

As the remaining distance shrank, the various feelings in my heart grew at an alarming rate. My breathing sped up. The edges of my vision were dyed white. However, I did not succumb to collapsing there. I walked. Intently, putting my legs in front of me.

Unaware of where I was until just before reaching the door, I stopped moving my feet before colliding with it.

Beyond that, was Asuna -. It was the only thing I could think of at that point.

Lifting my trembling right hand, the card slipped out of my hand due to sweat. I picked the card back up and inserted it into the slit in the metal plate this time. Holding my breath, I quickly slid it all the way down.

The indicator light color changed, and the door opened with the sound of a motor.

Softly, the scent of flowers poured out.

The indoor lighting had been dimmed. A faint white light was coming through the window, reflected off of the snow outside.

The center of the hospital room was covered by a big curtain. There was a gel bed on the other side.

I could not move. Could not continue. I could not make a sound.

Suddenly, an unexpected voice whispered in my ear.

'Hey— she is waiting for you.'

I felt a hand gently push my shoulder.

Yui? Suguha? In the three worlds, it was the voice of someone who helped me. I took a step with my right foot. Then another step, and another step.

I stood in front of the curtains. I reached out, grasped the ends.

And pulled.

With a faint sound, like the wind across the prairie, the white veil shook and drifted.

"...Ah."

A small sound leaked from my throat.

A girl in thin medical examination clothes which resembled a light snow-white dress, sat up in the bed with her back to me, looking out the dark window on the other side. Her long lustrous hair was fluttering in the light from the dancing snow. Both of her hands lay in front of her body, holding a shining, deep-blue egg-shaped thing.

Nerve Gear. The crown of thorns that bound the girl had finished its duty and fallen silent.

"Asuna."

I whispered in a voice that was barely a sound. The girl's body greatly shook— Moving the flower scent filled air, and turned around.

Still waking up from a long slumber, her hazel eyes were filled with a dreamy light as she looked straight at me.

How many times had I dreamed of this? How many times had I prayed for this?

Out of her light-colored, wet lips, emerged a gentle smile.

"Kirito-kun."

This was the first time I heard it, that voice. It was very different from the voice I heard everyday in that world. However, shaking the air, shaking my sense of hearing, that voice that reached my consciousness, was many times, a great many times more wonderful.

Asuna removed her left hand from the Nerve Gear and held it out. That alone took considerable strength and she trembled.

Like touching a statue of snow, I gently, gently took that hand. It was painfully small and thin. However, it was warm. Like trying to heal every wound, the warmth seeped through that contact. The strength left my legs unexpectedly, and I entrusted my body to the edge of the bed.

Asuna reached out her right hand, gently touching my injured cheek, she tilted her head in question.

"Ah... the last battle, really last battle ended just a little while ago. Finished..."

While saying that, from both of my eyes, tears overflowed at last. Drops fell on my cheek, flowing to Asuna's finger, and shining in the light from the window.

"...I'm sorry, I can't hear properly yet. But... I understand, Kirito-kun's words."

Asuna stroked my cheek with care and whispered. My soul trembled as I heard that voice.

"It's finished... finally... finally... I meet you."

Tears which shone silver streamed down Asuna's cheeks. Eyes wet, staring into mine as if she was conveying her feelings, she said:

"Nice to meet you, I am Yuuki Asuna. —I'm back, Kirito-kun."

I answered, stopping the crying in my throat.

"I am Kirigaya Kazuto... Welcome back, Asuna."

Our faces came together and our lips came in contact. Lightly. Then again. Strongly.

I placed my arms around her delicate body and embraced her.

The soul went on a journey. From one world to another world. From this life into the next life.

And, longing for someone. Strongly calling to each other.

In the past, in the big castle floating in the sky, a young man dreaming of being a swordsman, met a girl who cooked wonderful food, and fell in love. Although they no longer existed, their hearts after an endless journey, finally met again.

While I stroked Asuna's back as she cried, I looked with tear covered eyes through the window. In the increasing fluttering snow, I thought I saw two shadows side by side.

One, with two swords on his back and dressed in a black coat.

The other a girl dressed in the red and white of a knight, with a rapier hanging at her waist.

They smiled, holding hands as they turned around and slowly moved far away.

Chapter 9

"Ok class, we'll stop here for today. Assignment files 25 and 26 have been sent to you, please complete and upload them by next week."

With the sound of the bell´s chime declaring an end to the morning period, the teacher turned off the large panel monitor and left the room, after which a relaxed atmosphere drifted across the vast classroom.

I manipulated the old-fashioned mouse connected to the terminal and opened the downloaded assignments for a quick glance. After sighing at the lengthy questions that were likely to be both plentiful and mind numbing, I unplugged the mouse and closed the terminal, tossing both into my backpack.

Still, that chime was quite similar to the sound of the chapel at the starting city on Aincrad's 1st floor. If they had designed the tone knowing this fact, the designers of this school building have quite a dark sense of humor.

Of course, none of the students wearing a matching uniform seemed to worry about that. They were chatting happily while leaving the classroom in groups of three and five to the cafeteria.

Zipping up my backpack, I slung it over my shoulder and was going to stand up when the boy that I got along with in the next seat looked up and spoke to me.

"Ah, Kazu, if you are going to the cafeteria, save me a seat."

Before I could answer, another student who sat next to him answered with a grin.

"Don't bother, Kazu has an audience with the «Princess» today."

"Oh, I see. Damn that's nice."

"Yeah, well, that's how it is. Sorry."

I put up my hand to forestall their usual complaining and slipped out of the classroom.

I walked briskly through the pale green hallway and out into the middle courtyard through an emergency exit, feeling relief as the sounds of lunch time faded away, I took a breath. Brand-new bricks painted a path surrounded by trees. The school building that I could see over the top of

the trees was bare concrete with a cold appearance, but it was such an excellent campus that I could hardly believe it was a reused building left vacant by overall consolidation.

I followed the trail for a few more minutes, passing through a tunnel of greenery and found myself in a small round garden. Along the edge of the garden, surrounded by flowers, were plain wooden benches, one of which had a female student sitting while looking at the sky by herself.

Long brown hair hung straight down the back of her uniform's dark green blazer. Her skin was still pale white, but a tinge of red like that of roses had recently started returning to her cheeks.

Her long, slender legs were covered by taut black tights. Her figure, staring intently at the sky with the toe of her loafer making a pitter-patter sound as it tapped on the ground, was indescribably lovely. I stopped at the entrance of the garden, leaning on the trunk of a tree, continuing to watch the girl in silence.

She unexpectedly glanced over to where I was and broke into a smile as soon as she saw me. Then her face changed to a prim expression and she closed her eyes, with a 'Fuun', turning her head away.

I approached the bench with a wry smile and called out to her.

"Sorry for the wait, Asuna."

Asuna looked at me for an instant, pouting.

"Oh, why does Kirito-kun always try to watch from the shadows whenever he sees me?"

"My bad, my bad. Perhaps, I might have what it takes to be a stalker."

"Eh~....."

I sat down next to Asuna who was making an unpleasant face while leaning away, and stretched hugely.

"Ah... I'm tired... and hungry..."

"You sound like an old man, Kirito-kun."

"Actually, it felt like I've aged five years this month... Also—"

Putting my hands behind my head, I gave Asuna a sideways glance.

"It's not Kirito, but Kazuto. It's a breach of manners to use character names out here after all."

"Oh, I see. Just... then what's going to happen to me! Aren't I all exposed?"

"The reason is because you made your character name the same as your real name. ...Well, It seems I am exposed too..."

In this special «school», the students were players who had been in middle or high school before the SAO incident. Those orange players with a serious history of murder were undergoing more than one year of counseling that included treatment and observation. People like me who attacked others for self-defense, were inquired without leaving a criminal record like theft or blackmail.

People avoid using their names from Aincrad, but our faces are basically the same as in SAO. Asuna was apparently identified immediately after her admission, and I was recognized because I was well known to some upper level players, and in our long history I revealed my name and other things to them.

It was basically impossible to say that it had never happened and just forget it. It wasn't a dream, and our experiences in that world were a reality that we each had to settle in our own way.

I took Asuna's left hand, which was holding a rattan basket on her knees, in both of mine. It was still very thin, but it had recovered a lot since the day she woke up.

In order to meet the school admission date, she had been going through severe rehabilitation. Only till just recently was she able to walk without crutches, but running or rigorous exercise still seemed to be forbidden.

After her awakening, I frequently visited the hospital, seeing Asuna grit her teeth while tears flowed as she struggled through her training to walk, it pained me like my body was being cut. I quietly stroked her fingers again and again as I remembered those days.

"...Kirito-kun."

Hearing the shocked voice, I looked up to see a slight blush on her face.

"Don't you know? We are clearly visible from the cafeteria."

"Say what..."

Looking up, above the trees, I did indeed see the huge glass windows at the top floor of the school. I let go of my hands in a panic.

"Oh really..."

Asuna gave a shocked sigh and again mincingly turned away.

"I won't give lunch to such a scatterbrain."

"Ah, please spare me."

After desperately apologizing for several seconds, Asuna finally laughed, she opened the basket on her knees. She took out a round bundle wrapped in paper towels, and handed it to me.

Cheerful, I took it and opened it, inside I found a large hamburger with lettuce sticking out. The aroma immediately made my stomach growl, and I quickly took a large bite.

"This... the taste is..."

My eyes went wide and I turned to look at Asuna as I greedily chewed and swallowed. Asuna smiled as she said:

"Ehehe. You remembered?"

"How could I forget. This is the hamburger I ate on the 74th floor..."

"Well, it was hard to reproduce the sauce. It is an unreasonable story... struggling to death over there to imitate the taste of reality... and now that I´m back I find myself struggling to reproduce that world´s taste here."

"Asuna..."

I clearly remembered those happy days, and while feelings of sentimentality swept through me, I once again looked directly at Asuna.

Looking straight back at me, Asuna whispered with a smile.

"Mayonnaise is sticking to your mouth."

By the time I had finished eating my two large hamburgers and Asuna her small hamburger, lunch break was almost over. Asuna poured herbal tea from a small thermos, and spoke while holding a paper cup with both hands.

"Kirito-kun, what are your afternoon classes?"

"Today there are two classes left... Really, they do not write on the blackboard but an EL panel, we write not in notebooks but on a tablet PC, and homework is sent over wireless LAN. If it's like this then it's like having lessons at home."

Asuna laughed with a 'fufu' looking at me complaining.

"It is only now that you can use the panel or PC. Soon, schools will use holographic projectors... Also, thanks to this school, we can meet here like this."

"Well that is true but..."

Although Asuna and I were taking the same electives, because we were in different grades, there was a difference in curriculum, so we could only meet three times a week.

"And it seems this school is also a model for future generations. At least, that is what my father said."

"Hehh... Shouzou-shi, is he doing well?"

"Yes. He was very depressed for a while. He thought he had a bad eye for people. He resigned as CEO and half-retired, after letting off some of the burden on his shoulders, he might have lost his way. Well, if he finds a hobby, he will get well soon."

"I see..."

I sipped my cup of tea, looking up at the sky along with Asuna.

To Asuna's father, Yuuki Shouzou, that man was supposed to be the future husband of his daughter – Sugou.

On that snowy day, even after being arrested in the parking lot of the hospital, Sugou keep struggling in an ugly way. Silence after silence, denial after denial, eventually trying to put all the blame on Kayaba Akihiko.

However, one of his underlings confessed everything immediately after it was revealed that there was a major witness. When the fact that 300 SAO non-returnees were being kept at a server installed at the RECTO Progress Yokohama branch office and subjected to inhumane experiments

was brought to light, Sugou's escape routes disappeared. It seemed that the trial started just recently, but Sugou applied for a psychiatric re-evaluation. Though the primary charge was assault, whether or not the crime of abduction and confinement would be established somehow attracted the public attention.

What that guy was working on, the evil research on brainwashing through Full Dive technology was, in the end, proven to be a technology impossible to reproduce outside of a first-generation Nerve Gear. Besides, nearly all Nerve Gears should have been scrapped, it could be said that the results from Sugou's experiments made it possible for countermeasures to be developed.

What was fortunate, was that the 300 non-returnee individuals had no memory of being in the middle of human experimentation. There was no harm to their brains, and none of the return players had mental breakdowns. After enough medical treatment, it was said that it would be possible for all members to rehabilitate into society.

However, RECTO Progress and ALfheim Online... No, the genre of VRMMO games itself, suffered an irreparable blow.

Originally, the SAO incident alone fostered a significant amount of social unrest. That was concluded to be a freak occurrence of an exceptional crime committed by a lone madman, and this time... the incident caused by Sugou in the world of ALO that was previously hailed for its safety as a VRMMO game, drew attention to the possibility that all VR worlds could be exploited for crime.

RECTO Progress was eventually disbanded, but the main RECTO office also bore considerable damage, and all the members of the management team below the CEO were changed, even then, they were lucky to somehow survive this crisis.

ALO operations were suspended. Of course, the five or six other VRMMO that were still operating, though indirectly, received a huge blow in the form of a reduction in the number of users. It might still be impossible to escape the fate of shut down with the little income they were left with.

In that situation, something that could change the weakened and almost pulled out root was—

The «World's Seed» that Kayaba Akihiko had entrusted to me.

I must find out about Kayaba.

At the same time as the collapse of SAO in November 2024, Kayaba Akihiko had also died. That became clear two months ago— It was March 2025.

While Kayaba was Heathcliff in Aincrad for two years, he was in hiding at a mountain cottage built in the depths of an out-of-the-way forest in Nagano prefecture.

Of course, Kayaba's Nerve Gear did not trap him in the «Bonds of Death», so he was free to log out, but as the head of the KoB guild, he seemed to have logged on continuously for up to a week at the longest.

The person who helped him was a female graduate student who was with him in the same course of studies in the industrial department at the University of Tokyo, and was registered as having assisted the Argus Development Division.

It seemed that Sugou also worked in the same laboratory during his school days and harbored a burning rivalry for Kayaba while superficially pretending to adore his senpai. It seemed that this woman was also repeatedly courted by Sugou— I heard all this directly from the woman in person when she was released on bail last month.

I received her e-mail address by forcefully asking an agent from the emergency rescue headquarters, and after a lot of hesitation, I sent her an e-mail saying, 'I don't want to talk about resentment, I just want to know the details.' It was a week later that a reply came. She took the express from her current residence of Miyagi prefecture and came to where I live, her name was Koujiro Rinko. We went to a coffee shop near Tokyo station, where I heard the story she falteringly told.

It seemed Kayaba had decided to die with the collapse of the world of SAO before the incident even occurred. But it was an unusual way to die. It seems he remodeled a FullDive machine to perform a super-high-power scan of his brain, where it burned out his brain and killed him.

The probability of the scan being successful wasn't even 1 in 1000, but that woman who seemed delicate, yet strong of heart, felt that he'd succeeded.

If it worked as Kayaba intended, his own memories and thoughts, all of the electrical signals in his brain should have become digital code and should exist in the network as a real electronic brain.

After some hesitation, I told her how I had talked with Kayaba's consciousness in the old SAO server, and how he helped me save Asuna, and what he entrusted to me.

She bowed her head for several minutes, and after a drop of tear fell, said to me:

'- I visited the mountain cottage where he hid with the intention of killing him. But, I couldn't do it. Because of that, many young people lost their lives.

What he and I had done was not something that could possibly be forgiven.

If you hate him, please erase the thing he entrusted to you.

But if... if you have something other than hatred within you...'

"—Kirito-kun. Hey Kirito-kun. About today's offline meeting..."

Asuna struck me with her elbow, and I pulled myself back together.

"Ah— sorry. I was in a daze."

"Ohh. Whether there or here, you're still an easygoing kind of person when you are relaxed."

Asuna shook her head as if amazed, then with a sunny smile, rested her head on my shoulder.

* * *

Seated at the third circular table from the south, near the windows on the west side of the cafeteria, I was sucking forcibly through a straw, trying to get to the remainder of my strawberry yogurt drink at the floor of the carton. The loud slurping noise of my attempt was quite unladylike and caused Ayano Keiko, seated across the table, to frown.

"Geez, Liz... Rika-san, please drink a little more quietly."

"But that.... ah-, that Kirito, sticking together so much..."

From my height advantage in the cafeteria, I could see over the treetops at the bench where they were sitting, a boy and a girl nestled together with their shoulders touching.

"So outrageous jeez, doing that at school..."

"Yes, that's a bad hobby, peeping!"

I looked at Keiko for an instant before speaking in a slightly nasty tone.

"Saying that, wasn't Silica also looking hard until just a little while ago?"

Keiko, the dagger user Silica —it may have been the opposite— looked down with her face completely red, and began to stuff her mouth with her shrimp pilaf.

I crushed the empty pack and threw it in the trash a few meters away, then set my face on the table and let out a huge sigh.

"Ahh... if it was going to be like this, we shouldn't have agreed to that «One Month Truce»!"

"But wasn´t that Liz-san´s idea?! We should let those two get lovey-dovey for only a month, you said... that was totally naive."

"You have a piece of rice sticking to your face."

Once again, I sighed, then looked up through the glass windows at the white clouds passing by.

How did he find out my mail address? I still don´t know, but in the middle of February I suddenly received an e-mail from Kirito.

I was astonished, and in my head I heard the ringing of a gong for the second round while delightedly heading to the meeting place, but what Kirito had to tell me at that coffee shop was even more surprising.

Kirito seems to have been involved in that huge uproar with the «ALO incident». I was told that among those involved, Asuna was a special type of victim.

He said that Asuna really wanted to see me, so of course I went flying over for a visit. Seeing that figure, like an ice spirit about to melt away, my protective instincts for her in Aincrad were triggered very strongly.

Fortunately, Asuna regained her spirit day by day and was able to enroll with us at school. When I saw Asuna again, rather than seeing her as a rival, I had the urge to protect her like a little sister. With the friend in front of me who loved Kirito in the same way, I had formed the «Let's watch those two in warmth during May» alliance— the pact was done. But.

Sighing for the third time, I swallowed the last piece of my BLT sandwich, and then looked at Silica.

"Are you going to today's off-line meeting?"

"Of course. Lyfa... Suguha-chan is coming too. I can't wait to meet her offline for the first time."

"Silica, you have a really good relationship with Lyfa."

I looked at her while wearing a teasing smile.

"It must be that? There is a sense of closeness, because you're both the same as an «imouto[8]»."

"Muu..."

Silica's cheek twitched as she tossed the last shrimp in her mouth, muttered, then smiled as well.

"Liz-san is completely like an «onee-san[9]» these days."

For a few seconds, tension rose as sparks burst between us, then we both raised our head to look at the clouds, and sighed at the same time.

* * *

Agil's shop «Dicey Cafe», in front of its surly black door, hung an unsociable blackboard, with blunt characters saying 'Reserved for today'.

I turned toward Suguha beside me and said:

"Sugu, have you met Agil yet?"

"Yeah, I went hunting with him twice on the other side. He is a very big man!"

"I'll tell you, the genuine article is like that too. Be mentally prepared."

Beyond the wide-eyed Suguha, Asuna was giggling.

"Me too, I was surprised the first time I came here."

"To be honest, I too was terrified."

After knocking the frightened looking Suguha's head, I pushed open the door as my face stretched into a grin.

As the bell sounded with a 'clang-clang' sound, shouts of joy, whistles, and applause rang out loudly to cover it.

The shop that couldn't be called large was already tightly packed with people. Big bass speakers played a loud BGM —to my surprise, it was a BGM from Aincrad, the theme of Algade city played by an NPC orchestra— under that music, everyone had a glass shining in their hands, everything seemed like it was well underway.

"—Hey, we aren't late."

I said my excuse, then uniformed Lisbeth stepped forward to say.

"Yes yes, the main character has to appear at the end. You guys were told to come at a little later time. Well, we welcome you."

The three of us were pulled into the crowded shop quickly, and boosted on to a small stage at the back. The door closed with a 'Bataan', right after, the BGM shut off, and the lights were dimmed.

Suddenly, the spotlight fell on me, and once again Lisbeth's voice sounded.

"Ah, everyone together ready... now!"

"Kirito, for clearing SAO, Congratulations!!"

Everyone chorused. Loud sound of crackers. Applause.

While my face showed a dumbfounded look, I was showered by the flashes from many bulbs.

Today's off-line meeting— «Aincrad Capture Commemorative Party», was planned by me, Liz and Agil, but it seemed to have went ahead without me. The shop was full of people, exceeding my expectations by many times.

After a toast, everyone introduced themselves and then came my speech – this was not in the schedule at all – after that, Agil brought out several huge pizzas he had made specially for today, and the party dissolved into chaos.

I accepted the thanks from the men with a shake of their hands and some of the female players got a little too close to me when they gave their thanks, and I finally staggered to the counter and sank on to a stool.

"Master, bourbon. On the Rocks."

I told my unreasonable order to a very big man dressed in a black butterfly vest over a white shirt, who stared down at me for a few seconds. Surprisingly, he poured an amber liquid into a tumbler already holding rocks, and placed it in front of me.

I gingerly licked the liquid, relieved to find that it was Oolong tea. I looked up and frowned at the happily smiling shopkeeper, then a tall man sat down on the stool next to me. He was wearing a suit with a cheesy tie and a bandana wrapped around his forehead that was equal in bad taste.

"Agil, give me the real thing."

That man— Klein, the katana wielder, while holding his tumbler, turned on his rotating stool, and stared with a slack face at the corner of the shop table where a group of gorgeous girls were laughing.

"Hey, is that ok? You have to return to your company after."

"I can't work overtime without drinking. Anyway... that's nice..."

Looking at Klein drooping his nose, I sighed and took a drink of my tea.

Well, the scene was certainly a feast to the eyes. Asuna, Lisbeth, Silica, Sasha, Yulier, Suguha and other female players assembled in full force were worth taking a picture of. No— In fact, I should take a picture for Yui.

Someone had already sunk into the stool across from me, he was wearing a suit, and unlike Klein, he gave off the impression of a decent businessman. He was the supreme leader of «The Army», Thinker.

I raised my glass and said:

"By the way, I heard you married Yulier-san. It's bit late but— Congratulations."

Clinking our drinks, Thinker smiled with embarassment.

"Well, I am still doing my best to re-adjust to the real world. My job is finally on the right track..."

Klein also raised his tumbler and leaned over.

"No, I'm really happy for you! Damn, I wish I'd found a partner over there too. That reminds me, I saw that new publication: «MMO Today»."

Thinker once again revealed a shy smile.

"No, I'm ashamed... It is still lacking on content... Also with the present MMO circumstances, capture data or news is pretty much meaningless."

"This feeling is like the chaos at the birth of the universe."

I nodded, and looked at the shopkeeper who was shaking the shaker with a 'chakachaka' sound.

"Agil, how did it go? After that— about the «Seed»."

The bald headed giant grinned, exposing a smile that could make a child cry, and very happily said:

"Awesome. There are now about 50 mirror servers... around 100,000 downloads. About 300 large servers are running it."

The «World Seed» entrusted to me by Kayaba Akihiko's conscious modeling program -.

Several days after my meeting with Kayaba's female assistant, with some help from Yui, I downloaded the huge file that had been stored in my Nerve Gear's local memory onto a memory chip and brought it to Agil's shop. The reason I took it there was because I thought he was my only acquaintance who could help the seed germinate.

For Kayaba and his creation, the floating castle Aincrad, of course there were some feelings of hatred. The world of that death game had killed some people who had ties to my heart. For those people who died in fear— And also for her, I would never forgive Kayaba.

However, even among that great hatred, there exists a feeling of sympathy, which I unfortunately can't deny.

Because there was life and death, that castle truly felt like a real and different world. Even though I was eager to escape that world, at the same time, I loved it deeply. There was surely an everlasting feeling of hope deeply etched in the depths of my heart.

Thus, I thought that I should at least find out what buds from the «Seed».

The Seed of the World.

Developed by Kayaba, it was the complete sensory environment for the FullDive system, it was called «The Seed», a preset series of program packages.

Kayaba modified the SAO server autonomous control program «Cardinal», downsizing it to be able to run on small servers, above that he added game components for development to the package.

In other words, if you want to create a VR world, you need a so-so big server with enough bandwidth, download the package, design the 3D objects or put in an existing one, run the program, then a new world will be born.

The development of a program to control the input and output of five senses was extremely difficult. All VR games which were currently operating in the whole world were controlled by the cardinal system developed by Kayaba in Argus, with a terrifyingly huge licencing fee.

With the fallout of Argus, the program rights were transferred to RECTO, and when RECTO Progress was dissolved, there were offers to sell the rights, but with the enormous price tag, and the decline of the VR game genre due to social criticism, not a single company accepted, so the VR genre itself seemed to be in retirement.

What appeared on the stage was the completely free compact VR control system, «The Seed». Agil made full use of his connections to thoroughly inspect the program entrusted to me, confirming there was no danger of any kind.

Where Kayaba's real intention was— to say that there is no risk in the program, and what happens after it was released, no one knows other than Kayaba himself. However, I think the basis of his intentions originate from one simple feeling.

That was the pursuit of «another true world», an endless dream.

I asked Agil to help upload «the seed» to servers around the world, completely free to everyone, whether personal or companies.

For the dead ALfheim Online, it was saved by ALO players, who had many people from venture companies.

They funded a new company, and bought all of the ALO data from RECTO for a very small fee.

The vast land of ALfheim was given birth in a new cradle, all the player data was completely inherited. It seems less than ten percent of the previous players left the game due to the incident.

Of course, ALfheim wasn´t the only new world born from this "Seed".

Hundreds of companies and individuals who previously couldn't afford the licensing fees, started VR game servers one after another. Though some charged and others were free, they came to be connected mutually as a natural flow, and some meta rules were introduced. Now, they are implementing a mechanism that will allow a character created in one VR game to be converted to other game worlds.

Also, The Seed's use isn't only for games. Education, communication, tourism, new categories of server are born everyday and every day produces new worlds -.

The day when «real area placement» of the VR world exceeded the size of Japan would not be far away.

Thinker continued with a wry smile, his eyes still immersed in a dream somewhere.

"We are probably witnessing the creation of a new world. To bind that world to the term MMORPG is too narrow. I'd like to update the name on my homepage... though the right word doesn't come easily."

"Umm... Hmm..."

Klein folded his arms with his brow furrowed deep in thought. I elbowed him, and laughingly said:

"Hey, nobody expects anything from someone who has the sense to name their guild «Fuurinkazan»."

"Say what! To tell you the truth, I'm being flooded with applicants for the new Fuurinkazan!"

"Ooh. I hope there is a cute girl."

"Guh..."

Seeing Klein struck speechless, I laughed then turned to Agil and said:

"Well, has the plan for the second meeting changed?"

"No, tonight at 11 o'clock, in Yggdrasil City."

"So that means..."

I said, lowering my voice.

"That worked?"

"Yes. It seems they grouped the new servers and used them as one, after all it's the «legendary castle». The number of users has increased, and the capital by a great deal."

"I hope it runs smoothly."

—After initialization, the old SAO server was completely discarded. However, when the development data from Argus was given to the new managers of ALO, it contained something that no one expected.

I finished drinking my tea, and held the glass in both hands while looking at the ceiling of the shop. The dark panelling looked like a deep night sky. Faint gray clouds flowed through. The moon appeared, dying the world blue. Then something huge emerged from the distance—

"Hey Kirito, come here!"

Lisbeth who looked dizzy suddenly shouted as she waved her arm to get my attention. "...That girl, she couldn't possibly be drunk..."

While my eyes were fixed on the huge glass filled with a pink liquid she was holding, I whispered. Hearing me, the outlaw shopkeeper wore a straight face and said.

"It's below 1% so it's fine. Tomorrow is a holiday anyway."

"Hey hey...."

I shook my head and stood up. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

Through the jet black night sky, Lyfa was soaring.

She kicked the atmosphere with the four pieces of her wings, slicing through it, accelerating endlessly. The wind roaring in her ears.

Before, for the sake of gaining the maximum flight distance from a limited flight, for the most efficient cruising speed, it was necessary to use a flight method cycling acceleration and gliding, a lot of things had to be taken into account while flying.

But that was now a thing of the past. The shackles that bound her did not exist in the current system.

After all, there was no City in the Sky above the World Tree. The fairies of light, ALF, did not exist. The Fairy King bestowing rebirth to those who visited him was a fake king.

However, this world collapsed once, it reincarnated in a new land, the new rulers— no, moderators, granted the inhabitants of every fairy race with wings of eternal flight. Not as an ALF, but as the people of green wind, Sylph, Lyfa felt that it was plenty.

Logging in an hour before the meeting time, Lyfa was flying from the capital city of the Cait Sith, «Freelia», the place she was staying at for the moment, she had already been flying continuously for nearly 20 minutes. Meanwhile, without even resting for a second, her wings simply oscillated with full strength on her order, the magical propellers emitting a glass green light did not lose power in the slightest, continuing to respond to Lyfa's will.

According to Kirito, this new world's acceleration theory was very similar to a car's.

Immediately after taking off, extend the right and left wings to a greater extent, «torque oriented» —was what Kirito said, but she didn't understand it— this flight method allowed a strong kick in the air.

For gradually speeding up, sharpen the angle of the wings, reducing the amplitude. At the highest speed, the wings are folded almost in a straight line, oscillating at a speed so high that from the point of view of the ground, it looks like a colorful comet flying past. When that stage is reached, the acceleration decreases, how fast you can go depends only on your spirit. Most players would soon start to slow down, overcome by fear and mental fatigue.

In the «cross-ALfheim race» that was held last week, Lyfa and Kirito were in a dead heat. She had jumped ahead at the last second, taking first place by a very small margin. Those two were so much better than the other players, that they endanger the chance of a 2nd race.

...That time, was a lot of fun...

Lyfa made a small, reminiscent smile while flying. Just before the goal, when Kirito had overtaken her, he used a dirty trick in order to make Lyfa laugh, he had yelled a stupid joke and she had burst out laughing. For revenge, she made an antidote potion into an object and threw it at him, if it missed then her top position would probably have been in danger and stolen.

Flying in such an event was nice— but after all, when she was able to empty her head and just concentrate on accelerating to the absolute limit, that was the thing that she found most comfortable.

Her speed had already risen to the limit after a few tens of minutes of flight. The earth wrapped in darkness flowing by quickly became just a strip, small city lights occasionally appeared ahead, but quickly passed behind.

She felt that she had reached the highest speed so far— while thinking that, she opened her wings for an instant, bent backward and threw herself into a quick climb.

Overhead, the huge moon was shining through a break in the clouds. Aiming toward the blue white disk, she rose like a rocket.

After a few seconds, with a subtle change in the sound of the wind, she plunged into the sea of clouds. She flew through the black veil like a bullet shot from a gun. Lightning flashed from point-blank range, dying the clouds white, but she charged on without minding it.

Before long, she passed through the sea of clouds. Below spread the world of pale blue moonlight, the clouds forming an endless plain. The only things she could see were the clouds and the tip of the World Tree. As her speed was slightly reduced, Lyfa closed her lips, held out her fingertips and intently aimed for the moon. It might have just been her imagination, but the diameter of the silver plate of the moon seemed to get slightly bigger. A number of craters were clearly visible.

It might have been an illusion, a group of lights in the big central hallow seemed to shimmer and twinkle. Might there be a town in which the people of the moon live? A little more— Just a little closer—

However, at last the end of the world, a wall at the altitude limit caught her. Acceleration decreased, and her body seemed to grow heavy. The end of the virtual space was just ahead. She couldn't rise beyond that, so it couldn't be helped. But...

Lyfa stretched out with her right hand as much as she could. As if to seize the moon, she spread her fingers.

She wanted to go. Even higher. Far, far away. Beyond the stratosphere, separating from gravity, until the moon. No, beyond the orbit of the planet, beyond the passing comets, into the ocean of stars -.

Her climbing speed finally descended to zero, then became negative. Still with her hands spread wide, Lyfa began to free-fall in the night sky. The moon gradually receded.

But Lyfa closed her eyes and smiled.

For now, it's unreachable, but—

From what she had heard from Kirito, there were plans to connect ALfheim Online with another larger VRMMO, making a nexus. For starters, they should be connecting to a game with the moon's surface as a stage. That way, it might be possible to fly to the moon. With each game world added as a planet, the day when there was a ferry that comes and goes across the sea of stars will come.

Fly anywhere. Go anywhere. But... There is a place she absolutely cannot go.

Suddenly, Lyfa felt lonely.

While falling toward the fluffy clouds, Lyfa hugged her body tightly with both hands.

She understood the reason for her loneliness. Tonight, in the real world Kirito— Kazuto, brought her to a party, it was that party's fault.

It was very fun. Until now, new friends that could only be seen in this world, meeting them for the first time in the real world and talking with them about many things. Three hours had quickly passed by.

However, at the same time Suguha felt it. They are linked with something that couldn't be seen... a very strong bond. In «that world», the floating castle Aincrad that currently no longer existed, they fought together, cried, laughed, and loved, the memories— those, even when they returned to the real world, still shone from their hearts as a strong light.

Her feelings of love toward Kazuto hadn't changed.

At night, saying good night in front of the door. In the morning, running together to the station, it always felt like soft and warm sunlight.

Whether or not they became real brother and sister, they might become strangers living in different cities, and that would make her shed tears of sadness. But right now, living under one roof every day made her happy. She didn't need to have all of Kazuto's heart. As long as there was a corner that was just for her, it was good enough.

—Finally, she was able to accept it like that.

At that party, she had a feeling that Kazuto was going far away, to a place that she would never reach. She was not allowed to trespass within those people's bond. That place had no room for Suguha. Because Suguha had no memory of «that castle».

Body small and rounded, Lyfa continued to drop like a meteor.

The sea of clouds was approaching. Because the meeting place was the newly established Yggdrasil City at the top of the World Tree, she should have opened her wings and started gliding. But, because her heart was filled with cold loneliness, she couldn't move her wings.

Cold wind blew past brushing her face. Steadily stealing the warmth from her heart. She would just fall like that into the dark sea of clouds, sinking deeper and deeper—

Suddenly, her body was caught by something, and she stopped falling.

"—!?"

Lyfa opened her eyes in surprise.

There was a face in front of her, it belonged to Kirito. He was holding her with both hands, hovering just above the clouds. 'Why?' —Before she could ask, the dark-skinned Spriggan opened his mouth.

"I was worried about how far you were going to rise. I came to pick you up because it is almost time."

"...I see ...thanks. "

Lyfa laughed with a smile, flapped her wings and flew from Kirito's grasp.

The new ALfheim Online administrators, had transferred all of the game data from RECTO Progress, which included the character data from the old Sword Art Online. Therefore, thanks to the administrative body, the former SAO players were able to choose to whether or not to use their old characters in ALO, including appearance.

Because of this, the players that Lyfa played with daily, Silica, Asuna, Lisbeth have characters infinitely close to reality, beside their fairy racial characteristics. But when Kirito was given a choice, he did not revive his earlier appearance, choosing instead to continue with the figure of a Spriggan. He had also chosen to re-initialize his stats, dissolving his previous impressive skills and training from scratch.

At this point, Lyfa wanted to know his reason, and asked her question while they hovered in the sky.

"Hey, onii-cha... Kirito-kun, why didn't you return to your original figure like the others?"

"Hmm..."

Kirito crossed his arms, his eyes became cloudy as he seemed to look into the distance. Then he answered with a small smile.

"The role of that world's Kirito has ended."

"...I see."

Lyfa also wore a small smile.

She had met the Spriggan warrior Kirito first and they went on a journey to the World Tree. Thinking of that made her a little happy.

Moving in space while standing up, Lyfa took Kirito's right hand.

"Hey, Kirito-kun. Let's dance."

"Huh?"

Pulling Kirito whose eyes were wide, she began to glide above the clouds as if sliding.

"This is the recently developed high level technique. While hovering you can slowly move in a lateral direction."

"Oh I see..."

Nothing stimulated Kirito's mind like a challenge, his expression turned serious as he began to match Lyfa while gliding. However, he soon lost his balance and toppled.

"Wooah!"

"Hehe, it won't work if you try to move forward. Instead, all you need is a little upward thrust, at the same time glide sideways."

"Mumuu..."

Lyfa pulled Kirito's arm as he unsteadily struggled for several minutes, but as expected of his ability to adapt, he soon looked like he had mastered the trick.

"Oh... I see, so it's like this."

"Right. Good, nice."

Lyfa smiled as she pulled a small bottle from a pocket at her waist. Opening the lid and letting it float in the air, drops of silver light spilled from the bottle, and at the same time a clear string instrumental ensemble that came out of nowhere could be heard. It was an item sold by a high-level Puca ministral, stuffed with their performance.

With the beat of the music, Lyfa slowly stepped into dance.

Large step, small step, another large step, they gently danced upon the air. With their two hands clasped together, staring into Kirito's eyes, improvising to match the direction of movement.

Two people glided, turning round and round on the endless sea of clouds, lit silently by the pale moonlight. At first a slow movement, but gradually speeding up, each of their steps going farther.

The green light being scattered from Lyfa's wings overlapped with the white light scattering from Kirito's wings, vanishing on collision. The sound of the wind receded. Lyfa closed her eyes gently.

The feelings in Kirito's heart flowed through his fingertips, and she felt and accepted them.

This could be the last time, Lyfa thought.

To date, there had been several times when, with a moment of magic, the feelings of the two had intertwined. It was probably the last time for that, too.

Kirito— Kazuto, had his own world. School, comrades, and an important person. His wings were strong, and his steps too big, the hand he extended couldn't quite be reached.

Two years ago, since the day he didn't return from the journey he started in that world, indeed their paths had started to grow further apart. In order to become closer to his back, Lyfa had tried on fairy wings, but half of Kazuto and those people's hearts were even now still occupied by the mirage of the castle that floated in the sky.

With the advances in science and technology, the virtual world becomes a real one without limits. It goes beyond the boundaries of a game, turning from a virtual world into a reality. However, people are not clever enough to live in many realities. Kazuto had surely accumulated far too much of his share of joys and sorrows, and of love in that world. A world of fantasy that Suguha would never be able to visit.

From her closed eyelids, Lyfa felt the tears pour out.

"—Lyfa...?"

Kirito's voice reached her ears.

Lyfa opened her eyes, looking into his face with a smile. At the same time, the small bottle that was full of music waned, fading out, disappearing along with the faint sound of the bottle breaking.

"...I, for today, will be going back."

Lyfa said as she let go of his hand.

"Eh...? Why..."

"Because..."

Once again, her tears overflowed.

"...It's too far away, onii-chan's... and everyone else's place. For me, I can't go there..."

"Sugu..."

Kirito looked at her with serious eyes. He lightly shook his head.

"It's not like that. If you think you want to go, you can go anywhere."

Not waiting for an answer, Kirito grabbed Lyfa's hand again, and with a firm grip, turned around.

"Ah..."

With the powerful sound of wings, he began to accelerate. Straight toward the the World Tree towering beyond the clouds.

Kirito flew at a breakneck speed that didn't even allow words. Their linked hands never even loosening slightly, Lyfa frantically tried to keep up.

The World Tree grew to cover the sky as they approached it. Among the many branches, at the point where they divided from the trunk, there were innumerable lights shining. The lights of Yggdrasil City.

From the center rose a remarkably high tower shining brightly, toward which Kirito soared.

From the collection of lights, the light leaking from the windows of the building, and the streetlights illuminating the streets were beginning to be seen individually— it was at that time.

Multi-layered bells began to sound. It was the bell signaling midnight in ALfheim. Inside the World Tree, set up in the large upper cavity above the elevator connecting Yggdrasil City to Aarun, the sound echoes through the whole world.

Kirito spread his wings wide, suddenly braking.

"Waaah!?"

Lyfa was unable to stop, and they almost collided. Hovering, Kirito spread his arms and as she bumped into him, stopping her by hugging her gently.

"We didn't make it in time. —Here it comes."

"Eh?"

Not understanding the meaning of his words, Lyfa looked at Kirito's face. With a wink and a grin, Kirito pointed to a corner of the sky. Turning her body around while still in his arms, she looked up at the night sky.

The huge full moon, glowing a bright, clear blue. —That was all.

"The moon... What about it?"

"There, look carefully."

Kirito further extended his arm. Lyfa stared hard.

The shining circle of silver, at the upper right edge— was slightly chipped.

"Eh...?"

Lyfa's eyes opened wide. Lunar eclipse...? She thought for a moment, but then remembered that such a thing had never happened in ALfheim.

The area of the black shadow eroding the moon increased steadily. However, its shape was not circular. It was like a triangular wedge biting into it—

Suddenly, Lyfa's ears caught the sound of a low growl. 'Gon, gon' the solemn sound echoed. From far away, the whole sky shook, as if something was falling.

The shadow that appeared finally stretched to cover the whole moon. However, the moonlight still shone from beyond the shadow, illuminating the vague triangular shape. Steadily getting bigger and bigger. It was coming closer.

It appeared to be a cone-shaped object. The sense of distance couldn't quite be grasped. She strained her eyes, wrinkling her brow. And—

Suddenly, the suspended object began to shine.

Bright yellow light was being emitted in all directions.

It looked like it was made with many thin layers stacked together. Light spilled from the space between the layers. Three huge pillars hung down from the base, their glowing tips dazzling as well.

A ship...? A home...? Lyfa tilted her head in puzzlement. In the meantime, it grew bigger. Already, it had come to completely blanket that part of the sky. A bass sound shook her body.

From the bottom layer to the next, she noticed something as she stared. Many small projections stretch from the bottom to top. No— Those are—

Buildings! Huge buildings with windows on many floors seeming to be tightly packed. However— From calculating the size of the buildings, that one building that's over ten floors is about the same height as the Tower of the Wind. Then, the floating cone's full height must be... hundreds of meters, no, a few kilometers...?

"Ah... No way... No way, that is..."

As she thought about what she was seeing, lightning flashed in her mind, illuminating the truth.

"That is...!"

She turned around and looked at Kirito's face.

Kirito gave one big nod, and spoke in a voice which couldn't hide his excitement.

"Yes. That is— the Floating Castle, Aincrad."

"—! ...But ...Why? Why here...?"

The huge floating castle slowed, then stopped moving just before touching the upper branches of the World Tree.

"It's for a rematch."

Kirito said in a quiet voice.

"This time, we will perfectly clear each floor, from floor one to floor one hundred, and conquer that castle. Earlier, it ended after being three-fourths completed. Lyfa..."

Kirito placed a hand on her head and continued.

"I have now become weak... Give me a hand."

"...Ah..."

Lyfa choked on her voice and looked at Kirito's face.

—If you think you want to go, then you can go anywhere.

Tears fell down her face again, onto Kirito's chest.

"—Yes. I will go... no matter where... together..."

Snuggling up to Kirito, she watched the absolutely huge floating castle, from the direction of her feet came a voice.

"Hey, you're late Kirito!"

Lyfa looked at the source, a yellow and black bandana around his red hair, a formidable long katana on his waist, Klein was rising up.

Beside him, the Gnome with brown glowing skin, carrying a huge battle axe on his back, was Agil.

Carrying a Leprechaun-only silver hammer, dressed in a pure white and blue apron-dress was Lisbeth.

With gorgeous long black ears and tail, a small water color dragon on her shoulder, was Silica.

Flying hand in hand, was Yulier and Thinker.

Still unused to flying, holding a stick while flying unsteadily was Sasha.

Unknown when they were gathered, Sakuya and Alicia Rue, along with several other Cait Sith and Sylph players were next.

Waving his hand and raising came Recon.

Along with General Eugene and an army of Salamanders.

"Hey, we are going to leave you behind!"

Leaving only Klein's yelling sound behind, the huge party flew ahead into the night sky, heading to the castle in the sky.

And finally in a white tunic and mini skirt, a silver rapier on her waist, a small pixie sitting on her shoulder was Asuna, her long blue hair glittered as she stopped in front of us.

"Let's go, Lyfa-chan!"

Lyfa timidly grabbed Asuna's outstretched hand. Asuna smiled, moved her water colored wings and turned.

Yui flew from Asuna's shoulder onto Kirito's shoulder.

"Hey, Papa, hurry!"

Kirito's piercing glance looked at Aincrad, for a moment he was downcast. His lips moved, whispering a name, but she couldn't hear it.

When Kirito raised his head vigorously, his face had his usual dauntless smile back on again. He spread his wings wide, aiming for the sky in front.

"Ok— Let's go!!"

Author's Notes

Good day, I am Kawahara Reki. Thank you for holding my 8th book, 'Sword Art Online 4: Fairy Dance'.

This one story came in two volumes, with a very long epilogue. When I started writing, it was just going to be the story of the hero, Kirito, searching for and finding the heroine, Asuna. But to fulfill this and that element, the pages started adding up.

One of those element is, "Can only playing a RPG normally become a novel?", a trial mistake.

When I wrote the first volume of SAO, I found out that a RPG novel can't work without some kind of setting. Because, no matter how much of a life or death pinch the hero has in the game, the hero in the real world is not hurt the least. Since that is «just a game», you can «reset it to end», to remove these two options, the first volume was a Death Game, that is dying in game means death in a real kind of setting.

But, always inside me, there's the question 'does it really have to be like that'. If a RPG novel can't be made without this kind of setting, then that would mean my feelings of excitement and passion as a MMO player would be fake. Making a party with friends, stepping gingerly into a dungeon for the first time, the joy from that, I want to see if I can make a story out of it. This is a huge theme in these two volumes of "Fairy Dance".

How well I accomplish it... if you who finished reading the last page thinks 'I want to try a MMO' then you would have understood (laugh).

Based on a «Virtual Netgame Novel», this expansion of SAO series, from the next volume will be a big turn of the wheel, it will start to wander around or runaway completely. This might extremely disturb people who like the first test. The only thing that will never change is that it will be Kirito's story (laugh). I would be happy if you continue to watch his future adventures.

Many characters from the previous volumes and monster group were beautifully drawn and illustrated by Abec-san, the many revisions which delayed again and again trouble my editor Miki-san, I thank you both again this time! And to you who stuck with me to the last, I thank you for your large storage capacity!

January 28th 2010, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ Shounen manga is manga marketed to a male audience aged roughly 10 and up.
2. ↑ In Japanese mythology, Ryūgū-jō (Palace of the Dragon King) is the undersea palace of Ryūjin, the dragon god of the sea.
3. ↑ Armadillidium vulgare, the (common) pill-bug or (common) pill woodlouse, is a widespread European species of woodlouse
4. ↑ Bathyesthesia: general term for all sensation from the tissues beneath the skin
5. ↑ For MMO game term — running around with agressive/active monsters chasing you. Train here is the vehicle meaning.
6. ↑ Monster Player Killing — gathering aggressive/active monsters and using them to kill other players.
7. ↑ Flag — meaning a trigger/state of a start/completion for quests or events in games.
8. ↑ Imouto means little sister
9. ↑ Onee-san means big sister.

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Credits

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Generated on Fri Jun 14 17:15:11 2013